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Wallace Stevens And The Long Poem: Constructing A New Stage

Lorraine Christine DiCicco

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WALLACE STEVENS AND THE LONG POEM:

CONSTRUCTING A NEW STAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

It is the aim of this study to challenge the traditionalist reading of the modern long poem by closely reading the long poems of a reputedly lyric poet--Wallace Stevens. Critics of his long pieces have recurrently interpreted him as perpetuating the chain of strong (male) lyric poets from Wordsworth to Williams. Their familiarity with the Romantic song of the self has led them to institute a blanket reading of the modernist long poem as an extended lyric.

Close readings of Stevens' long poems show how his diverge radically from those of his predecessors. First, Stevens exorcised himself from the tradition of the extended lyric, which he did when he wrote "The Comedian as the Letter C"--a parodic piece that pays tribute to the tradition as it rejects it. By abandoning his controlled, autobiographical context for his lyrical epic of consciousness. his later long poems begin to enter a more threatening (because of their generic openness) interdiscursive context dominated by the aberrant, which is later troped as the fat girl. His abandonment of the "golden centre" is, however, a slow process marked by two distinct phases: Stevens as a Rousseauistic interpreter, who still yearns for the consolations of resolution and meaning despite the poverty of the waste of words in which he wanders ("Like Decorations," "Owl's Clover," "Blue Guitar"); and Stevens as a Nietzschian interpreter, who is yet a scholar of one candle but who throws himself fully into the disseminative play of language without security ("Notes" is pivotal, particularly in teaching Stevens the beauty of the abstract ideal ["Credences of Summer"], of change ["The Auroras"], and of pleasure ["An Ordinary Evening"]).

Stevens teaches us that the generic instability of the long poem hinges on the imaginative violence of the lyric voice in its attempt to sustain its potency in an equally violent, yet radically different, disseminative context. The long poem is a (non)genre, whose power stems from its radical undecidability: both/neither lyric and narrative, masculine and feminine. It situates the reader (un)comfortably in the cushiony trap of the fat girl's folds. By reading for difference (not unification)--the long poem as woman and woman as writing--we can achieve a greater understanding of Stevens' long poems as well as of this (non)genre.

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PREFACE

As a student, I was trained to read the works of Wallace Stevens, lyrics and long poems alike, in a traditionalist fashion, a fashion which privileges his lyric qualities and which categorizes him as a lyric poet. That the most prolific of Stevens' critics--Vendler, Bloom, Riddel, Litz, Perloff--have read him consistently in this manner has made this position the strong fortress it has become. Intentionally or otherwise, these critics have argued for the significance of Stevens' poetry in the modernist period by placing him directly in line with a chain of strong (male) lyric poets: Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Eliot, Pound, Williams, and so forth. By reading Stevens in a manner with which they had become most familiar--familiarity with the Romantic song of the self--these critics have instituted a theoretical understanding of the modernist long poem as an extended lyric (to choose, arbitrarily, one of a series of terms). It is this understanding of the modern long poem that I wish to question in this study, so as to postulate a different, less certain reading of what the long poetic form is about. I use Stevens, not only because of the odd beauty of his long poems, but also because he is so insistently read as a lyric poet in the fashion of the Romantics before him.

It would appear that the valorization of the lyrical dimension of Stevens' long poems depends upon the concomitant suppression of the narrative dimension. My concern is not merely to reverse the hierarchy --supplanting the lyric privilege with the narrative one--but rather to explore their curious cohabitation in the long poem genre. Rather than continue to read for unification--by privileging the lyrical dimension so as to arrive at a notion of presence that places the speaker inside and outside of the structure, controlling it and yet escaping its aberrant play--I aim to

show how the lyric voice, necessarily, gets entangled in a continually disseminating narrative context, that both lures it toward truth, meaning, and synthesis and yet refuses it any such resolution. These are the preoccupying concerns of the first chapter, "The Long Poem: Stevens' Construction of a New Stage."

In order to create a truly "modern" poetry (a concern which is emphasized by my chapter titles, all of which play on lines extracted from Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry"), Stevens had, first, to repeat the long poetic structure as inherited from his Romantic and Modern predecessors. Chapter two, "'The Comedian as the Letter C': A Repetition of What Was in the Script," focusses on this duplication of the song of the self in terms of Stevens' first major long poem, "The Comedian," that singular poem whose radical difference from the remainder of Stevens' long poems is offset by its temporal isolation in the canon. A parodic reply to the lyrical epics of the past, this poem is a tribute to that tradition which gave it birth and, simultaneously, a rejection of that same tradition.

With "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," "Owl's Clover," and "The Man With the Blue Guitar," Stevens began freely to construct a new stage. Yet his was a freedom tempered, at this time, by a logocentric desire for resolution. Prior to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens is a Rousseauistic interpreter (in Derridean terms) who yearns for meaning or semantic stability despite the poverty of the waste of words that constitute the text of the long poem. While the poems discussed in chapter four share a tone of abandonment, these poems, discussed in "The New Theatre: Haunted by Plato's Ghost," are tonally dominated by a certain reserve.

With the writing of "Notes," Stevens learned to abandon himself to the figure of the fat girl. In this final chapter, "Woman/Writing: 'The Finding of a Satisfaction'," I begin with the premise that Stevens became a Nietzschian interpreter (to continue with Derrida's terminology), because he now willingly plays without the securities of the "golden centre." His willingness does not, however, automatically connote ease: the relation between the lyric (masculine) and narrative (feminine) impulses in the long poem is a torrid affair. For this poet, the long poem is the fat girl/writing. In her delightful folds, he comes to an appreciation of the beauty of the abstract ideal ("Credences of Summer"), of change ("The Auroras of Autumn"), and of pleasure ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven").

By way of Stevens' long poems, it is possible to see how the long poem depends on the imaginative violence of the lyric voice in its attempt to sustain its potency in an equally violent, yet radically different, disseminative context. The long poem is a (non)genre: it is both/neither lyric and narrative, masculine and feminine. It situates the reader (un)comfortably in the cushions of the fat girl's folds, which are also a trap. The power of this genre stems from its radical undecidability. By reading for difference--long poem as woman and woman as writing--we can achieve a greater understanding of Stevens' long poems as well as of this (non)genre, itself.

CHAPTER 1

THE LONG POEM: STEVENS' CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW STAGE

"The critics say that epics have died out..."
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
"Aurora Leigh," V

"The death of one god is the death of all."
Wallace Stevens
"Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"

I. The Phenomenological Readers: In Praise of the Lyric

Late in his career Stevens bemoaned his failure to be "a more severe,/More harassing master" (CP 486), yet few poets have exhibited the same degree of self-consciousness in their work as permeates every dimension of Stevens' poetry. The enormity of his will, that "violence from within" (NA 36), demanded to be exercised repeatedly within the form of the long poem. It is not (as Helen Vendler claims in the opening lines of On Extended Wings) that Stevens "believed" in writing long poems but that he was driven by his beliefs to this form of expression. Given modern reality, Stevens argued that "our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers" (NA 175). The recurrence of the long poem in Stevens' oeuvre is not accidental, arbitrary, or experimental, but something willed and insisted upon for reasons that have yet to be investigated.

Most criticism to date, notably J. Hillis Miller's Poets of Reality (1965), Joseph Riddel's Clairvoyant Eye (1965), Louis Martz's The Poem of the Mind (1966), Frank Doggett's Stevens' Poetry of Thought (1966), Helen Vendler's On Extended Wings (1969), and A. Walton Litz's Introspective Voyager (1972), to name only a few, posit for Stevens an ongoing and continuous oeuvre. While it may have been Stevens' intent to constitute himself through his poetry so as to

achieve "The Whole of Harmonium" before he died, the canon actually announces its own discontinuousness within its own history. From 1915 through to the writing of "The Comedian as the Letter C" in 1922, Stevens attempted longer and longer aesthetic forms. After the publication of Harmonium there followed a six year silence from 1925-30. When Stevens re-emerged into the public realm he announced, in "Farewell to Florida," that his own poetic history was marked by discontinuity. Insight into this self-proclaimed severance is attainable through an examination of his now compulsive desire to counter his neat lyrical impulses with the problematical form of the long poem.

Stevens' interest in the form itself goes well back to his Harvard days. In a notebook entitled "English 22--Long Theme-- 2nd hf-yr Wallace Stevens, Sp." and dated "1899 &1900" (SP 29), Stevens began his "long theme," which was a sonnet series written between February 22 and April 14, 1899. Apart from writing in the long form, Stevens' journal entries for July 18 and 19, 1899 testify that he was also deeply involved with Keats' long poem "Endymion" (SP 45, 46).[1] From this point onward Stevens exhibited a growing concern for and confidence in his ability to write a sufficient long poem, as any cursory glance through his volumes testifies. Despite his tendency to return repeatedly to the form, however, Stevens made relatively few comments about it. Writing to Harriet Monroe in 1922, he conceded to being amenable to the form:

> The desire to write a long poem or two is not obsequiousness to the judgement of people. On the contrary, I find that this prolonged attention to a single subject has the same result that prolonged attention to a senora has according to authorities. All manner of favors drop from it. Only it requires a skill in the varying of the serenade that occasionally makes one feel like a Guatemalan when one particularly wants to feel like an Italian. (L 230)

A month later, Stevens again mentions to Monroe his desire for a sufficient amount of time in which to write an adequate or long poem:

> I wish I could put everything else aside and amuse myself on a large scale for a while. One never gets anywhere in writing or thinking or observing unless one can do long stretches at a time. Often I have to let go, in the most insignificant poem, which scarcely serves to remind me of it, the most skyey of skyey sheets. And often when I have a real fury for indulgence I must stint myself ... Ariosto probably felt the same thing about the solid years he spent on Orlando. (L 231)[2]

Much later in his poetic career Stevens made two other major aesthetic claims, claims that revolve around the reader's experience of a long poem rather than the writer's. Yet Stevens' claims for reading are equally claims for writing. A long poem, he writes, "comes to possess the reader and...naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there" (NA 50). Typically for Stevens, the reading/writing of a long poem is a tripartite process: possession, naturalization, liberation. Five years later he pinpoints sheer length, mere duration, as essential for the evocation of a wealth of emotional responses:

> In the long poem, so many emotions, so many sensations, are stirred up into activity that, after a time, the reader finds himself in a state of such sensibility that it cannot be said that the scale and deliberateness of allegory fail to produce an emotional effect. A prolonged reading of Spenser's Faerie Queene, for instance, creates just such a state of sensibility. In general, long poems have this attribute, derived from their very length, assuming that they have been charged throughout with the emotions of the poet. (NA 111-12)

Apart from these few comments very little else is written by Stevens specifically on the form of the long poem. In those of his letters which refer to his various long poems, he does make comments which are instructive to the reader who wishes to know how to approach these poems. In one letter he calls what had yet to become "The Man with the Blue Guitar" a "group of poems, all of which are

short" (L 316); in another he refers to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" as a "miscellany in which it would be difficult to collect the theory latent in them" (L 430-31); and he describes the movement between the long poems "Notes," "Credences of Summer," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," not in terms of a seasonal sequence or autobiography, but as "the drift of one's ideas" (L 636).

As vague as Stevens' remarks are at times, his references to the long poem keep returning us to the thinking subject who is behind the vast overlay of language, keeping it "charged" with human emotions and feelings. In "Effects of Analogy" Stevens bespeaks his desire to write a central poetry, which must originate in the very centre of consciousness (NA 115). The centre of Stevens' aesthetics is the personality of the poet or his temperament, which is made manifest to the reader through the poet's choice of subject and his style (NA 120, 123). He writes, "What is the poet's subject? It is his sense of the world. For him, it is inevitable and inexhaustible. If he departs from it he becomes artificial and laborious and while his artifice may be skillful and his labor perceptive no one knows better than he that what he is doing, under such circumstances, is not essential to him" (NA 121); and, "What has just been said with respect to choice of subject applies equally to style. The individual dialect of a poet who happens to have one, analogous to the speech, common to his time and place and yet not that common speech, is in the same position as the language of poetry generally when the language of poetry generally is not the common speech" (NA 123). The poet's process of self-realization is, according to Stevens, achievable to the extent that he is capable of imaginatively dealing with his sense of our world, the real world. Thus, the measure of his greatness is "the measure of his sense of the world and of the extent

the mind of the poet verbalized in the form of the poem. It goes without saying then that "the greater the mind the greater the poet...the poet does his job by virtue of an effort of the mind" (NA 165). Form and mind (or whole personality) are rigorously linked in Stevens' aesthetics. Stevens extended his belief in unity of mind and the individual poem to include unity of mind and a man's lifetime of poetic writing. Unity of one's canon is the result of the unity of one's nature:

> Naturally, I do not mean to say that there is a straight line between the first poem and latest last, or what will be the ultimate last... Possibly the unity between any man's poems is the unity of his nature. A most attractive idea to me is the idea that we are all the merest biological mechanisms. If so, the relationship of origin is what I have just referred to as unity of nature. (L 294)

Stevens makes the inevitable connection between a willful mind and the long poetic form. He sees the twentieth-century imaginative man as "a metaphysician in the dark" (CP 240), standing on a stage he no longer recognizes because all the old verities and gods have disappeared, and the script has changed. The great epics of belief must now be replaced with the "epic of disbelief" (CP 122), for the new imaginative man will be "some harmonious skeptic...in a skeptical music" (CP 122). And what in this age--impoverished and fragmented and devoid of authority as it is--will constitute the consuming interest of such a skeptic? Stevens' answer is man's own desire to sustain a thought for a long period of time and, in doing so, to compose himself if only for that present moment.

In an age suffering from radical discontinuity from all of its traditional mythologies, Stevens names the true challenge, significantly, in his first major long poem: "Can one man think one thing and think it long?/Can one man be one thing and be it long" (CP 41). To write/to think/to be--form for Stevens a complete, unified circle: writing is thinking is being is.... Yet Stevens wants to write a major

particularly difficult poetry like Olson's, has the "potential of breaking down the reader's resistance to its intractabilities" (180). The long poem became for Stevens that form adequate to the enormity of his will and mind, for only in the freedom of its expansiveness could ideas, the reader, and form itself be decreated back to "the first idea" (CP 381) and seen anew as if for the first time. In short, because "everything is of a piece" (NA 48), Stevens can only conclude that "a certain order of forms corresponds to a certain order of minds" (NA 48).

Criticism since Stevens' death in 1955 and throughout the 1960's, by and large, followed suit. Critical text after critical text proceeded to ground its reading of Stevens on his aesthetic claims, made available for the first time in 1951, with the publication of The Necessary Angel. What came to birth was a whole school of criticism that Frank Lentricchia has aptly referred to as "the Phenomenologists" throughout all of After the New Criticism. One of the fundamental assumptions unifying this diverse group of scholars is that language is inherently meaningful and, by extension, that the written poem is a means through which the author voices and communicates his feelings and emotions to an audience capable of understanding the significance of such claims for himself and all men. The poet is, as Wordsworth claimed, "a man of speaking to men."

Roy Harvey Pearce was one of the first critics to bring Stevens into the phenomenological mode in The Continuity of American Poetry. In 1961, he claimed that poetry is "derived from the poet's concern to declare that language, in spite of all that we may do to it, is inherently meaningful--no matter what the ultimate source of meaning --because poems made out of it can manifest its capacity to mean" (431). But Pearce did make clear what the ultimate source of

meaning was--the ego or Pouletian cogito. Throughout the sixties J. Hillis Miller, Joseph Riddel, James Baird, Louis Martz, and Helen Vendler, for example, echoed Pearce's central claim that Stevens' poetry consisted of ongoing mental acts of self-development. Given that the root of poetry's meaning lay in the ego for Pearce, he understood Stevens' poetry to be "set by a determination to test the transcendent only in terms of the poet's profound sense of his own radically humanistic immanence, ever new and renewing, seeking--in all its variation of form, seeking always to exhaust the infinitely fecund power of a man to make, and only thus to know himself" (428). The resulting humanistic vision was that the self, although a changing and growing self, was unified and ennobled by its imaginative search for identity in a world devoid of the transcendental. As links in a chain expanding outward from a stable centre, the canon encircled and mirrored this ego-centric process; furthermore, the criticism encircled and mirrored the canon. Frank Doggett entitled his book Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Thought, Walton Litz saw Stevens as the Introspective Voyager, Louis Martz placed him in a continuous line of meditative poets in a book entitled The Poem of the Mind, and Ronald Sukenick read the canon as the thoughts of a man Musing the Obscure. As these titles indicate, the key to the poetry lay in what Derrida calls the "metaphysics of presence." The thinking subject--"Stevens" --was privileged as the "transcendental signified" or the "ultimate referent" capable of guaranteeing that the poetic utterances possess an ultimate and determinate meaning.

In order to comprehend what significance these phenomenological readings have had on the long poem in Stevens and in theory, we need to look closely at Helen Vendler's On Extended Wings (1969), which remained the only published

study devoted solely to Stevens' long form until R. Patke published The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens in 1985. Continuous with the phenomenological studies of the sixties, which led to canon studies grounded on developmental or organic metaphors, Vendler's text reconfirms the priority of the unity of the Stevensian voice. This voice realized itself, in her interpretation, into forms likened to a "musical theme with variations" (14). Therefore, while individual poems present different "nuances of feeling," these differences are always seen against an underlying stable ground composed of "the general patterns into which his voice falls" (37). Difference is nonthreatening for Vendler because the canon is ultimately unified by Stevens' "persistent armatures of thought" (37) manifest in "the characteristic sentence forms, the characteristic logic, the characteristic resolutions" (37). Hence, her own methodology in this book supports her New Critical-Phenomenological roots. Proceeding sequentially through the long poems is, she argues confidently, "one way, if not the only way, of tracing both his states of feeling and his enterprises and inventions" (2). The sequence of stylistic development in the poems is natural and organic, because it mirrors the development of Stevens as a man and a poet changing as he grows from middle to old age. Taken as a whole, the long poems give us Stevens' "world" and "naturalize us in it" (7). As the reader encounters one long poem after another he or she experiences, as though simultaneously with Stevens himself, that slow evolution of Stevens' sense of himself through his search for his own style or voice (3).

Implicit in her argument is the New Critical assumption that the individual poem is an autonomous, closed, autotelic whole, yet it is also part of a genetic

chain whereby one poem emanates naturally out of a preceding one. Therefore, like life itself, the long poems are teleologically oriented until, in the end, "utterance is utterance, and the exertion to make it something more has disappeared" (5). Vendler's reader will be rewarded with understanding if he or she understands the life that underlies it. To do so means effacing one's own identity so as to privilege the Author-Father of the text: in traditional criticism, as Roland Barthes has said, "to find the Author is to explain the text" (Image-Music-Text 147). For Vendler, the author is that "final signified" that, upon being found, will close the writing, decipher the hieroglyphically encoded message, and put the life to rest.

Vendler's reticence to relinquish her humanistic mission for Stevens is most apparent in her latest book, Wallace Stevens, Words Chosen Out of Desire (1984), which canvasses Stevens' shorter lyrics. Suddenly finding herself in a foreign theoretical context, she insists, in a more dogmatic fashion than in 1969, that we can infer from Stevens' poetry a stable, albeit hidden, centre from which all his poems emerge directly. Initial comprehension of the secretive "facts" of Stevens' life is the reader's departure point if he wishes to be navigated properly through the Stevensian canon. As she sees it, her mission is to reconstitute this human figure from "the 'world of ghosts'" (6) where, she implies, deconstructionism has relegated Stevens. She writes that

> in spite of the severe impersonality of Stevens' style, in spite even of his (often transparent) personae, it is himself of whom he writes. He has been too little read as a poet of human misery. (11)

Claiming some sort of mysterious insight into his "human pang[s]" which are "secreted inconspicuously in the poem[s]" (12), she alleges that she can "isolate" what she takes to be "psychological or human 'beginning' of the poem, its point of

origin in feeling, which ... serves as the center from which the other lines radiate" (12). In a self-reflexive fashion, what Vendler has yet again reconstituted is not Stevens' desires, but her own romantically-based, logocentric desire: the sensitive reader can grasp the words on the page as though they issued directly from the voice of the speaker spontaneously expressing his current thought. For her, Stevens is still "a man speaking to men."

I have linked these two books by Vendler together for a specific reason: this latest book on the lyrics reiterates her arguments on the long poem. This repetition of her argument is important because, in her view, it would serve to unify the Stevensian canon completely. Whether reading lyrics or long poems the reader's governing motivation is to isolate the central self, from whom meaning will be imparted. If, however, these two forms have the same end, then why write two books? Is a book on the long poems which says much the same thing as a book on the lyrics necessary? Why not amalgamate the two forms in one study as does Riddel in The Clairvoyant Eye, Litz in Introspective Voyager, or Bloom in Wallace Stevens: Poems of Our Climate? All of the above critics, Vendler included, consider Stevens' long poems to be his major work, but Riddel, Litz, and Bloom's methodologies foreground an argument that Vendler's double texts repress. By using a single text wherein to elucidate that Stevens' long poems are his major works, Riddel, Litz, and Bloom all imply that the lyrics are marginal pieces rendered important only when gathered up into the form of the long poem. While Vendler ultimately argues the same point, her use of one text per form implies a difference based on form itself, yet this radical difference is not only never acknowledged, but shown to be non-existent. In short, her methodological form

creates assumptions that are actually undone by her argument.

According to these critics, the lyric-long poem relationship is one of likeness and unity, as opposed to difference. The canon is the all-embracing whole, "The Grand Poem" composed of "Preliminary Minutiae." Generic differences are left unquestioned in the criticism of these four critics, only to create much the same effect as did Shelley when he effaced difference between poems, poets, and ages in his "A Defence of Poetry." For Shelley, individual poems are "fragments and isolated portions," which those born in happier times were able to perceive as "episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world" (CW 124). In 1965 Joseph Riddel epitomizes an analogous position when he marginalizes Stevens' lyrics by arguing that they are merely fragments or "minor pieces" that become significant only when reunited "magisterially" into the long poem's embracing form (CE 10). Likewise, in On Extended Wings, Vendler puts the lyrics in a subservient relationship to the long poems; thus, the long poems "form the illumined large to which the lyrics, volume by volume, attach themselves" (2). In an oddly roundabout fashion, A. Walton Litz seemingly grants priority to the early experimental lyrics of 1914-37, but only so as to educate the reader, making him fit to approach the later and longer works. Knowledge of Stevens' early work is crucial in Litz's view because it marks the origin of his later, unified poetic. Throughout Introspective Voyager he reads the canon sequentially so as to "[follow] the natural contours of Stevens' poetic life, drawing its categories from his own writings wherever possible" (vii). Stevens' long poems are like Henry James' house of fiction, claims Litz, because they "have a commanding center which controls a

multiplicity of related points-of-view" (287). He, like Riddel and Vendler, sees the two forms as complementing one another, because the long form can surround a multiple of alternate lyric positions. All three critics valorize the long poem as a genre capable of synthesizing multiple particulars due to an aesthetic of mimesis: the long poem is analogous to the thinking mind, which Shelley once called "the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought" (CW 117). For Riddel, the long poem is "the landscape of a mind rich in particulars but nonetheless composed or moving toward composure" (CE 10-11). Likewise for Litz, the long poem coheres because at its center is "the integrity of a presiding mind... rehears[ing] again and again the premises and possibilities of an achieved vision" (IV 288). These critics indirectly postulate an equivalency of form between the lyric and long poem because they ground their readings on phenomenological assumptions. To speak of the long poems as "illuminatory" (Vendler, OEW 2) of the man Stevens is indicative of their logocentric desire to grant privilege to a metaphysics of presence, which places writing secondary to voice and meaning.

Paradoxically, at the same time that these critics seem to stress the long poem in Stevens' canon, they are actually privileging the lyric within the long poems by interpreting the long form as a compilation of brief lyrics. Harold Bloom's study conceals the same paradox. In his "Preface" he says that he has emphasized the long poems, but his theory of poetic crossing, which he finds operating in all of Stevens' poetry and in all strong Post-Enlightenment poetry, is his "contribution to a theory of lyric poetry" (PC vii). Admittedly, he swerves from traditional phenomenological Stevensian criticism by refusing to posit, and thereby privilege, origin in the logocentric notion of "author," who speaks truths through

language to men. Bloom "opens" the reading by insisting that meaning resides not in the author as "final signified," but between texts and also wandering around within texts. The single authorial voice, on which Stevens and the phenomenological critics insisted, is now splintered. When reading "Sunday Morning," for example, Bloom discovers in stanza four alone "intricately [woven] together images of voice out of 'Tears, Idle Tears', the 'Ode on Melancholy', and the 'Recluse' fragment" all enmeshed in an "involuntary intertextuality" (32). Origin is always already marked by repetition, which implies that comprehension of Stevens' canon is only possible if one acknowledges his repressed Romantic and post-Emersonian American precursors.

Yet, although Bloom opens the sealed hermeneutics of the phenomenologists who wish to preserve the authorial-figure himself, he willfully resists the deconstructive tendency to replace totally the troper with the trope alone. Stevens is, for Bloom, a "figure of capable imagination," a troper seeking Emersonian "Self-Reliance" by breaking other poems so as to create through a will-to-power poetry that is a repetition and a deviation. As a belated poet, Stevens is a "master of misprision" (396) because, he argues, "If a condition of poetic strength is a cunning in evading and distorting tradition, as I think it is, then what can persist and become tradition in any language must be the strength of misprision also" (394). At the heart of Bloom's theory is a persistent and stubborn humanism, which serves to place him between the phenomenologists and the deconstructionists. "Consciousness and writing alike," Bloom writes, "take us back to will and what it intends, and however such intentions are viewed they are being troped..." (396). It is Bloom's humanism that leads him to insist that tropes are always figures of will,

and his Gnosticism and Kabbalism that steers him away from considering texts as "linguistic structures" to visualizing them as "instances of 'the will to utter within a tradition of uttering'" (393).

As powerfully as Bloom tells his fantastical tale of Stevens' crossing of election, solipsism, and identification, and as much as he succeeds in "finding [Stevens'] poetry more truly and more strange than it has yet been found" (406), he, like the post-Romantic Stevens, is also a "great inheritor" (400) of his own theoretical precursors: Poe, Emerson, and Whitman. When Bloom analyzes long poems so as to develop a theory of lyric poetry, he is relying on assumptions about the long poem that Poe established in 1846 and 1850:

> What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones--that is to say, of brief poetical effects. It is needless to demonstrate that a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief. (LC 22)

Furthermore, wrote Poe,

> I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, 'a long poem', is simply a flat contradiction in terms. (LC 33)

Bloom (like Riddel, Litz, and Vendler before him) relies on the Romantic theory of poetic discourse as lyric unity, which prevents him from addressing the long poem as a distinct entity replete with its own governing assumptions. Modern poetry is for Bloom an extension of the Romantic lyric; as a result of his unwillingness to see to formal differentiation, he grounds the modern long poem in the Romantic lyric. Bloom's critical "advance" on a reading of Stevens' poetry is neither a theoretical nor a generic advance over the phenomenologists of the sixties or his Romantic American precursors.

II. The Lyrical Epic: A Genealogical-Generic Line from Wordsworth to Pound

While I shall return to their phenomenological insistence on the lyric, what I have attempted to show thus far is that, although the long poem became vital to Stevens as he matured, critics tend to shy away from the issue of its genre. Rather than continue to write lyrics (like Donne or Yeats) or an epic (like Whitman or Pound), he either consciously chose to write long poems or else long poems just accidentally emerged. Intentionality aside, the resultant long poems fall somewhere in the gap between the brief lyric and the encyclopedic epic; the long poem is marked by this difference. Yet as far back in the American genealogical line as Edgar Allan Poe, the long poem has been denied an independent generic identity replete with its own attendant assumptions. One's immediate impression is that the modernist poet's difficulty in sustaining a long poem has extended into the critics' difficulties in defining them. Travelling without an Aquinas map, critics have tended to ignore issues of form because there is no traditionally sanctioned set of codes by which to examine its modern manifestation. The current tendency is to identify this form by that which it is not, by seeking its origin in those genres which have been granted sanction by literary history--the epic and lyric forms.

Since Aristotle, the originator of genre classification, a distinct hierarchical structure has been established among the genres, according to the "depth" of the particular genre's significance to society. Certainly each genre had its own idiosyncratic contribution to make and a poet of import would be adept at the multiple forms, but the truly great poet was the tragic and epic poet as opposed to the lyricist. The twentieth century is, however, divided in its allegiances to epic and lyric discourses. The epic poet, traditionally speaking, was to abolish his own

identity and language so that the privileged identity of the social group and its very language could be relayed transparently through the poet as social spokesperson. The marginalization of the self was the communal model. Society was to see itself reflected in the objective portrayals of the hero's actions without the inconsequential interference of the subjective. Whether the author of The Odyssey was a man or woman, one or many, is ultimately irrelevant given the form's assumptions. In some critical circles, the epic bias continues today: despite T.S. Eliot's desire to reinstate the lyrical Donne as a focal modernist, Harold Bloom names the epical Milton as the "Covering Cherub" lurking behind the modernist, and generally lyrical, poet's anxiety to be central.

Those critics who valorize epic discourse in the long poem over lyric discourse, the voice of the social group over the voice of the single man, stress intent of the form regardless of how altered a shape it has taken since the days of The Odyssey or the Aeneid. Recall momentarily Milton's own experimentation with the form. Although he was willing to stretch or shrink the perimeters of the generic boundaries, Milton understood only too well the necessity of sustained continuity with his Greek and Roman precursors. How then was he to justify the ways of Paradise Regained to his audience? In The Reason of Church Government, he asserted that the battle between Christ and Satan was undoubtedly of epic proportions to all mankind. By focalizing the entire span of human history on the pivotal verbal warfare between a truth-sayer and a forked-tongued rhetorician, he had likewise to strip down the traditionally bulky epic machinery. The end result was what he referred to paradoxically as a "brief epic" as opposed to the commoner "diffuse epic" (668). In spite of its reduced extent, due to the elimination of

conventional epic devices, the poem remained epic in intent and implication. Paradise Regained is not, therefore, a mere supplement or appendage to Paradise Lost, but a rigorous and adequate conclusion.

Not unlike Milton himself, various contemporary readings of the modern long poem also overlook categorical omissions and divergences in the form in the desire to stress its epic intent and, hence, its cultural significance. Pound's Cantos are interpreted by himself and his critics as a modern-day epic, despite its radical dissimilarities in technique and structure from the ancient form. In Guide to Kulchur, Pound writes: "There is no mystery about the Cantos, they are the tale of the tribe--give Rudyard [Kipling] credit for his use of the phrase" (194). Given the poem's compilation of discourses, collapse of history into a simultaneous present, paratactic structure, and abandonment of traditional narrative sequencing, the few tribal readers who are able to make sense of their tale recognize that underneath the Eleusinian profusion of a "heteroclite set of impressions" (GK 208) lies the Confucian necessity for human ordering. An epic poem can still be written, even if there is no narrative sequencing, because order in his poem and in culture rests (as it did for Milton) on the fundamentally accepted continuity of a human ontology as reflected in the literary tradition. "No conception of culture [or epic] will hold good," wrote Pound, "if you omit the enduring constants in human composition" (GK 47). Pound's long poem is an epic and an epic is, by his definition, "a poem including history." Not unlike Milton's epic, Pound's poem also returns to epic origins, by especially perverse routes. In "The Tradition," he writes that

> A return to origins invigorates because it is a return to nature and reason. The man who returns to origins does so because he wishes to behave in the eternally sensible manner. That is to say, naturally, reasonably, intuitively ...He wishes not pedagogy but harmony, the fitting thing. (LE 92, emphasis mine)

How Pound returns to epic origins is answered by Michael Bernstein in The Tale of the Tribe. He posits that, although the Cantos reflect the traditional epic conventions and machinery, it is an epic due to the expectations aroused in the reader by virtue of the poet's and the genre's implied intentions. As a tale of the tribe, the poem will provide a narrative of the readers' complete culture, as well as provide them with historical models; create a disembodied narrative voice which will speak the community's sociolect, not the personalized ideolect; present itself to the collective citizen, as opposed to the isolated individual; and, lastly, consider its function to be didactic (14). Given the authorial and generic intentions governing the work, the Cantos is not named a long poem but, in Bernstein's terms, a "modern verse epic." His concern is not for "extent" but "intent," because the poem creates an "intentional framework within which the particular exchange, poem/reading, can proceed" (15). Apart from authorial and generic intent alone, Bernstein's analysis of the epic throughout literary history leads him to conclude that

> no one constellation of fixed attributes, no set of necessary and sufficient elements, can be isolated that would allow us to determine by a purely formal analysis whether or not a poem is an epic. (13)

As we saw in Milton's apologia for Paradise Regained, which differs so radically in presentation from Paradise Lost, the determining factor of epic categorization centuries later still rests strictly on both authorial and generic intention. The formal indeterminacies of the epic are always determined by the presence of the authorial subject and the genre's inherent assumptions; in summation, no matter how it goes about accomplishing its purpose, all epics will accomplish a like purpose (narrative of one's culture, communal voice, audience as communal body).

If Bernstein is correct in saying that no exclusively formal analysis will enable us to identify a poem as an epic, can we consider any one of Stevens' long poems to be epic if neither he nor the poems themselves declares them so? James E. Miller, Jr., in The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction, answers no. While he believes that the three headings within Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" are a "recipe" for how to write a modern epic, the poem itself is not an epic (51). Unlike Bernstein whose definition of epic intent lies closer to the traditional concept of epic regardless of its current facade, Miller's definition of a modern epic rests on Whitman's transposition of the genre into his native America in Leaves of Grass. The definition of the modern epic that Miller is left with is problematical because it straddles and collapses two traditionally antithetical genres--the epic and the lyric:

> a long poem whose narrative is of an interior rather than exterior action, with emphasis on successive mental or emotional states; on a subject or theme not special or superior but common and vital; related not in a literary, measured and elevated style but in a personal, free, and familiar style; focusing not on a heroic or semidivine individual but on the poet himself as a representative figure, comprehending and illuminating the age; and whose awareness, insight, being--rather than heroic actions --involve, however obliquely, the fate of the society, the nation, the human race. (36)

This redefined and recreated Whitmanian form is referred to by Miller as a personal epic, an anti-epic, or a lyric-epic (36). Miller's paradoxical definition is grounded on the Romantic collapse of the subjective and the objective. Recall Emerson's claim in his essay "History": "All history becomes subjective; in other words there properly is no History, only Biography" (6). By extension, the poet must write his biography because, since he alone is "representative" of man ("The Poet" 3), his biography is all men's history. Whitman's Leaves of Grass answered Emerson's edict that "the true poem is the poet's mind" ("History" 13), which made him the

first American bard to achieve the grandeur of Italy's Dante, who had "dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality" ("The Poet" 28). The paradoxical nature of Whitman's redefinition of the modern epic is captured in the opening lines of Leaves of Grass (1892 Ed.): "One's Self I sing, a simple separate person,/Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse" (1-2). In this more current second view, a long poem is recognized as a modern lyric-epic when its objective epic intent is internalized, focalizing all cultural history on the individual ego: the poet is one man and every man in a world where merely "being" constitutes a horrific task. Whitman both made and unmade the traditional epic; hence, his new form expresses epic intent and epic defiance simultaneously (James E. Miller, American Quest 33).

Neither Bernstein's nor Miller's definition of the modern epic is satisfying for an analysis of Stevens' long poems, which never make claims of epic intention (nor does Stevens make such claims for them). Nor is Stevens overtly personal in his poetry, if he is ever personal at all. Still, though, we need to recall his concern that poetry express an "indirect egotism," which may be a far remove from ego-centripetalism, but it is still concerned with privileging "personality." Stevensian critics, who are themselves products of a determining historical context, tend to posit the origin of his long poems in the diametrically opposed genre of the lyric.

The current critical tendency to read all poetry as a lyrical discourse is not new. In Poetry as Discourse, Anthony Easthope marks the Renaissance as the historical period when the ancient bias for epic literature terminated. The swerve from epic to lyric discourse in poetry was not accidental, according to Easthope, but historically produced by the rising English bourgeois, who had an ideological

investment in its production (24). Unlike the earlier epic, lyrical discourse centered and foregrounded the individual speaking subject (the man of emotion behind the transparent words and the signified) while suppressing polysemic voices (language itself, and the signifier) (45). This bourgeois form of discourse emerged because of an ideological desire to grant the subject an absolute position of authority. As a discourse, the governing assumption of the lyric is to "[aim] to make the subject 'see' itself as a transcendent ego, an absolutely free agent, centre and origin of action, unproduced, given once and for all..." (27). In assuming that speech is the location of the source and full presence of meaning, and that voice lies in intimate proximity to mind, one then assumed poetry to be the unmediated transmission of the conscious intention of the speaker. Poetry's role was twofold: expressive and communicative. Signifier and signified existed in perfect unity because the origin of the sign's production was a single, perfectly unified author (30). Poems were considered to be like the books Milton describes in Aereopagitica; they are

> not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as the soul whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. (720)

Like the containing vial, the language of the lyric is transparent. The authorial intention and the words inscribed on the page cohabit in pure correspondence, free of interference and purely transmitted.

Just as length is critical to the epic's concern to embody universal man and his culture so is brevity critical to the lyric's desire to crystallize a fleeting emotion without sacrificing unity. How then can critics use the lyric as a model for the long poem when the two are explicitly antithetic regarding duration? It was Poe's insistence on effect, beauty, and unity in his poetics of the lyric that led him to

protest the very possibility of the existence of a long poem. He felt that poems were to be unified and brief because it was their sole purpose to create Beauty, whose effect it was in turn to elevate the Soul. Any attempt to sustain this transcendence was doomed to failure:

> That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags--it fails--a revulsion ensues--and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such. (LC 33)

In short, poems cannot be long. But much to Poe's chagrin long poems did exist. Still insisting that length automatically cancelled out unity, he was left to define long poems as "merely a succession of brief ones" (LC 22). Paradise Lost was not a pure piece of poetry, but half prose and half poetical excitement intermixed (22-3). Poe's definition of long poems as a string of brief lyrics has become the common definition in America. Critics repeatedly read American long poems in this manner, and their reading ossified into generic boundaries. The genre which developed is appropriately called by Lawrence Lieberman, in his reviews of American poetry between 1964 and 1977, the "extended lyric." Freed in the course of time from Poe's classicism, Lieberman announces joyfully that this form is "one of the most fertile and inviting territories for the poet today" (251), because it swerves away from the fragmentary nature of experience depicted in isolated lyrics and "initiates a return to structures that are large enough to cope with our most important experiences" (251).

As problematical as the "long poem" is, however, poets throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been unceasingly drawn toward it. In fact the major poets of both centuries experimented not so much with epics as with long

poems: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelly, Keats, Arnold, Tennyson, Browning, Whitman, Eliot, Pound, Crane, Stevens, Williams, Ammons, Olson, Berryman, and so forth. Beginning with the Romantics, the epic became an impossibility, as Keats' "Hyperion" poems indicate. Trying to capture the grandeur of the Miltonic epic together with a Wordworthian emphasis on the growth of the mind, Keats found that he could not resurrect the splendid form. Like the hand of the dying Saturn which lay upon the ground, Keats' first "Hyperion" poem lay "nerveless, listless, dead,/Unsceptred" (I, 18-19); the gods had died and the epic was left abandoned though unfinished. Whitman prophetically announced the death of the gods for Americans in his "Preface" to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass: "There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done...A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest" (729). And the call continued to reverberate. Stevens describes what the death of the gods means to his own age:

> To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge [as it was Keats' desire to argue in the "Hyperion" poems]. It is simply that they came to nothing...It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling that in a measure, we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in a solitude, like children without parents, in a home that seemed deserted... (OP 206-7)

Desolation, homelessness, dispossession, solitude were all that man was left with unless he observed himself as

> the increasingly human self, which instead of remaining the observer, the non-participant, the deliquent, became constantly more and more all there was or so it seemed; and whether it was so or merely seemed so still left it for him to resolve life and the world in his own terms. (207)

The death of the heroic epic gods marked the simultaneous birth of the new hero: the mind of man. The response of individual poets to this fact vacillated between metaphysical despair and humanist triumph, but the fact remained. Industrialization, science, mechanization, and skepticism created an incompatible terrain for a continued belief in the old god, the old mythologies and verities.

A new stage to host this new hero in his new drama had to be erected. The precedent was prepared in Wordsworth's "Preface" to the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads (1800) and constructed in his revolutionary new "epic"--The Prelude; or Growth of a Poet's Mind. The action-oriented objective epic of the past was reconstructed into the contemplation-oriented subjective lyrical form. Since the Romantics, the new form is no longer organized in a narrational fashion because the phenomenal world of action and events had been irreparably destabilized. The objective world existed, but only through one's subjective interpretation of it. For Shelley, the chaos of modern-day existence was rooted in this notion of relativity: "All things exist as they are perceived; at least in relation to the percipient" (CW 137). Knowledge of the mind of one of imagination, namely the poet, was a means of penetrating through the accidents of existence into the shared universal so desired by the Romantics. Shelley felt that poetry either

> spread its own figured curtain, or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common Universe of which we are portions and percipients... (CW 137)

The turn to the mind's "own figured curtain," however, marked the end of strictly narrational epics. Devoid of the Miltonic muse who, Shelley claimed, enabled Milton to conceive the whole of Paradise Lost in his mind before writing it (CW

136), the modern poet could only work with his random, piecemeal thoughts. The narrational mode of an era that was capable of sustaining ongoing beliefs gave way to a series of fleeting perceptions and impressions imitative of its fragmented, fast-changing world. The long poem was no longer a protracted and involved story, but a string of emotional reactions caught in the pull of time and its apparent aimlessness. Coherence existed, but now in the subterranean depths of the poem--in the psyche of the poet--and not on its surface. In the Prelude, Wordsworth set the precedent for successive generations of poets to ground extended poetic works in the diminutive lyric.

Despite Poe's protest that to prolong peak lyrical emotion over an extended period of time was an ultimately self-cancelling and unnatural gesture, Whitman's Leaves of Grass naturalized the form for twentieth-century poets. The form Whitman established was to mark a radical break from his British forefathers. He demanded of himself and his own poetic sons in America that they destroy the poetic left by the Old World, because it was "grown not for America, but rather for her foes, the feudal and the old--while our genius is democratic and modern" (WWW 244). The new, poetically-uninhabited America provided Whitman with his genius loci and here he would find the "open road" that he needed wherein to experiment with his long open poem. The virginal land had not yet been poetically exploited, as had England by the Romantics. Joyfully, he announced his self-divestiture from the past:

> From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
> Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
> Listening to others, considering well what they say,
> Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
> Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me. (Leaves 121)

Unlike the Romantics, who always feared a collapse into solipsism through inexhaustible examination of "the untrodden region of my mind" (Keats, PW 212), Whitman aimed to correct this tendency by grounding his long poem on a democratic philosophy which, he felt, allowed him to escape the same impasse. Hence, he claimed that the poet's function in this form is to "act as the tongue of you,/Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd" (Leaves 69). The mind of the poet was to be porous, all-inclusive, and as generous as the form itself, the two being mirrors of one another. The one and the many, the citizen and the individual, the United States and the individual state were harmonized and unified within the embracing, non-exclusive boundaries of the long poem. With duration came unity as opposed to fragmentation, because only by bringing the multiple and heterogeneous together in one form could it cohere into the singular and homogeneous. Democratic coherence implies, for Whitman, that the one and the many be sustained as co-existing forces harmoniously playing off one another.[3] In "Song of Myself" we read: "Always a knit of identity, always distinction" (24). What should be apparent is that despite Whitman's assertion that he is self-begotten, his aesthetics remain fundamentally Romantic. His Leaves of Grass, which was to give a new voice to a still mute frontier, repeated the Romantic belief in the perfectability of man which the poet would liberate, since he epitomized the ideal in everyman. The Whitmanian poet could confidently declare that he would "celebrate myself, and sing myself/And what I assume you shall assume" (Leaves 22) because he believed in a divine, transcendent ontology that bound him to his audience in a shared value system.[4] Wordsworth had likewise centered his poetics on "the Mind of Man--/My haunt, and the main region of my song" (40-41), as mentioned in the

"Prospectus" to "The Excursion." The Wordsworthian injunction that poetry was the language of man speaking to men was translated by Whitman into "the belch'd words of my voice" (Leaves 23). Whitman also reiterated the Coleridgean and Shelleyan idealism that within the body of poetry "unity and diversity" or "the One and the many" would be unified. Like the unfinished Romantic poems, Whitman's mind-poem also resisted closure and literally became a "perpetual journey" (Leaves 68) that he tramped and retramped from 1855 until the year of his death in 1892. These are but a few of the many connections between Whitman and his Romantic precursors, for his desire to be self-begotten is only that--desire.

The form that Whitman brought home to America was not radically discontinuous with the Wordsworthian model. What he bestowed to his modern American sons was primarily what he inherited from his own fathers, but with a difference: an extended lyrically-based form now sufficient to embody the expansive and varied American locale and an enlarged lyrical "I," or a collective consciousness, in and through whom that which is disparate and dissociated can now be collated, not erased. What Whitman brought to America was fundamentally the Wordsworthian epic, which he swerved from by inflating the Wordsworthian mind of man so as to incorporate the mass, in a manner reflective of his particularly American concern for democracy. The core of the lyrical epic remained firmly grounded in the dominant self whose stream of consciousness governs the unfolding of the long form. In his great apology for the failure of Leaves of Grass, Whitman designates the self as origin and center:

> This was a feeling or ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America ... ("A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd

Roads," Leaves 444)

The only route to the periphery--America and Democracy--was by journeying through the center--"an identical body and soul, a personality" (451). His lyrical means of producing an epic intention are as inextricably bound in his form as his realistic experience of diversity is bound to his idealistic prophetic vision of democratic unity-within-diversity.

Haunted by the looming presence of Whitman with his "barbaric yawp" (Leaves 75) still ringing in their ears, modernist poets (like Pound, Eliot, Crane, Williams, Olson, and Berryman) took up the project he bestowed on them. The generic collapse of the lyric and epic impulses provided them with a means of escape from the closed, lyrical form which was left exhausted after the Imagiste movement of 1912,[5] with its emphasis on the direct treatment of the thing, the paring down of extraneous poetic rhetoric and ornamentation, and the organic merger of form and rhythm (Pound, LE, 3). Eliot's publication of The Waste Land (1922), with its 433 lines of verse, marked the longest sustained modernist poem to be produced. The lyrical barrier had been both simultaneously broken and sustained. From there Hart Crane went on the produce The Bridge (1930), William Carlos Williams published Paterson (1946-63), Charles Olson followed with his Maximus poems (1960-75), and John Berryman his Dream Songs (1964-68). Though Pound conceived and published his first Canto before them all in 1917, his long work was not concluded for more than another half decade--in 1969. The Cantos continued to grow and endure, all the while overlooking the others as they ripened to fruition.

Following Whitman's footsteps was liberating but, as is always the case when a child tries to fit his father's mould, equally a burden. Not only was the task a large one, as evidenced by the breadth of time spent in the making of such a poem, but these poets were also denied originality. Their own dream of being self-begotten was shattered by their inescapable genealogical tie to their poetic father. Pound only reticently admits to the existence of the blood line in "A Pact":

> I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman -
> I have detested you long enough.
> I come to you as a grown child
> Who has had a pig-headed father;
> I am old enough now to make friends.
> It was you that broke the new wood,
> Now is a time for carving.
> We have one sap and one root --
> Let there be commerce between us. (SP 27)

If Whitman "broke new wood," by creating an open form centered on the lyric self through whom "the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow" (Leaves 38), then the "carving," or the task of making the frontier habitable, was the assignment left to his modernist sons.

Their task was not a simple one. Certainly Whitman left behind the form--a long, open poem, improvisational, democratic, on-going, free-flowing, and centered on the "solid and sound" lyrical self (Leaves 38)--but its openness was terrifying. "The drama is," Pound writes in Canto 74, "wholly subjective" (430). There was neither an accompanying map to guide the poet through the chaos of existence, nor an accompanying God to guarantee him that he would succeed in creating meaning out of this chaos. Whitman's "open road" might turn out to be, what A. R. Ammons calls in Tape for the Turn of the Year, a "maze prison" (82). Where you were to go or how you were to proceed, you "cannot say, or guess, for you know

only/A heap of broken images" (Eliot, CP 63). It is not surprising that after William Carlos Williams embarked on his lyrical-epic Paterson, he attests:

> There is no direction. Whither? I
> cannot say. I cannot say
> more than now. The how (howl) only
> is at my disposal (proposal): watching-- (18)

And when, in "The Bridge," Crane himself faces "The Open Road"--"that span of consciousness" (95)--he calls for Whitman, renewing his faith in his predecessor's guidance:

> yes, Walt,
> Afoot again, and onward without halt,-
> Not soon, nor suddenly, -no, never to let go
> My hand
> in yours,
> Walt Whitman -
> so -
> (CP 95)

Whitman's call--his howl--still echoed temptingly in the modern ear, but he had left no formula for how to fill the open, empty form.

The form, imitative of the mind's epistemological questing, is predicated upon an aesthetics of process or becoming. The quest for self is a quest for form and vice versa. Neither can be known at the outset of the writing process, and one proceeds in the blind hope that the fragments of identity and literary form will cohere or that "the rose" will emerge "in the steel dust" (Pound, Cantos 449). The critical problem was how to achieve coherence when one fails to know at any given moment where one is going. Freed of bondage to the narrational sequence of old, the new lyrical-epic's success now depends on bringing its multiple fragments into a unity akin to the small lyric, that "well wrought urn." Would duration, as Poe forewarned, necessarily cancel the possibility for lyric unity? How was one to

weave together (an oft-repeated metaphor of these poets) the isolated and unconnected lyrics into the Whitmanian dream of "a unity in the same sense that the earth is, or that the human body, ... or that a perfect musical composition is" (WWW 763)? Although himself an avowed lyricist, Yeats describes how lyrics become unified longer works. In a sentence which syntactically mounds locution upon locution, and is thereby mimetic of the very theory he is propounding, Yeats writes that

> A little lyric evokes an emotion, and this emotion gathers others about it, and melts into their being in the making of some great epic; and at last, needing an always less delicate body or symbol, as it grown more powerful, it flows out, with all it has gathered, among the blind instincts of daily life, where it moves a power within powers, as one sees ring within ring in the stem of an old tree. (Essays 157-158)[6]

Yeats' use of an organic simile as an analogy for how such works will be produced--a tree naturally acquiring rings in the process of aging --bespeaks an ease with the unstudied that poets found easier to accept in theory than in practice. In theory, to trace in writing the minutae of one's thought processes as they emerge in any present moment held forth a double promise: one's central self would be bodied forth in the very process of its becoming and, simultaneously, one's poetic form would be a living reflection of this very process.

In a fallen, modern world, however, practice is always something divorced from theory, and the gap "Between the idea/And the reality" (Eliot, CP 91-92) is inescapable. Pound, Eliot, Williams, Crane, and those who came after knew that if form failed to cohere or the fragments failed to assimilate, then the central, pivotal presence would, likewise, fail to emerge. Theoretically, without internal coherence of identity and form, the work would remain a large, dead, and fragmented body--as

meaningless and insignificant as the scattered and torn body of Osiris. It is one thing to bask in the generic freedom offered by the form, as Ammons does when he demands with bravado that the form "absorb the margins:/enlarge the range:/give life room" (Tape 91). But the reality of the writing/reading process is slightly less comfortable, because it means proceeding on the blind faith that meaning or the large picture will be the end result of one's journeying "moorless in the drift of broken forms" (103). Therefore, it is another thing to accept the dark underside of this freedom, which is that the fragments may fail to cohere, forcing one to face the abyss of the self and the form. The risk of the void is always impending. A. R. Ammons, for example, was conscious that at any unforeseeable moment one may have to endure the "loose/ground" where "fragments lose meaning" (154). The new hero, alone and travelling with only the periplum, may not be strong enough to reconstitute the torn body of "truth" for himself. He may suddenly and unwillingly fall into the abyss of meaninglessness and absence. To become overwhelmed by the fragmented and potentially meaningless nature of patternless particulars is, horrifyingly, to "feel around in/the dark/for a hold/&...touch/nothing" (154-55). Maximum freedom of being had its dark "other"--maximum anxiety of nothingness.

It is my contention that this new form pulled poets in opposed directions: wanting to get it all (a strategy that continually deferred closure) and wanting to keep it whole or all of a piece-- epic and lyric impulses respectively. Even more importantly, I would argue that the lyrical impulse surpasses the epic impulse in significance, making the pull of forces unequal. The desire to include the heterogeneous within the form is possible only if the central, lyrical "I" is large and magnanimous enough to embrace the diverse and stable enough to endure its

fragmented manifestation until (by poem's end ideally) it becomes graspable as a whole. The lyrical insistence on the self is the central motivating force that sustains and propels this long form to epic dimensions. Ironically, the larger, more liberal, and open the mind is, the more that it cannot be emptied out or exhausted within any form because form implies a structure with boundaries and a center.

Despite the formal demand for containment and the mind's inexhaustibility which itself defies formal restrictions, the ideal remained lyric resolution. William Carlos Williams' dream of lyric wholeness is immanent throughout Paterson, where symbols of unity abound: one typical example is the fleeting image of the newest and youngest Indian wife who is merely sitting on the log, yet with full knowledge that she is inextricably bound, through the chain of other wives, to the oldest, first wife seated at the furthest end of the same log. Through a series of such images, Williams promises his readers that the multiple fragments composing the poem will become "all of a piece" (21) because they, too, share a common origin--the mind of Paterson. The promise of aesthetic and socio-psychological unity--supported throughout the poem by metaphors of weaving, the ouroborus, the cyclical river, and the seasons--is broken when the poet recognizes the unsustainability of this fiction. Conceding failure in Book Five, Williams writes: "I cannot tell it all" (273). The complete picture/meaning of the tapestry/mind that we had been promised remains incomplete--"a fragment of the tapestry" (273). Seventeen years of Williams' poetic life went into the making of Paterson, but even if he had spent more time on his tapestry/lyrical epic, there is no guarantee that he would have been any more successful. From its outset the quest is always already doomed to failure.

Williams' defeat was not without a noteworthy parallel. After spending more than fifty years writing The Cantos, Pound also "concludes" his gesture in defeat. Trailing off into unconnected fragments, Pound's lyrical epic remained only "a tangle of works unfinished" (795). Pound's answer as to why his poem "failed" is critical: "I lost my center/fighting the world" (802). Given that the best of modern poets have attempted the long form in an age no longer consolingly rooted in a knowable past, but broken and turned upside down by two world wars and represented largely in the discourse of the isolated and stark Imagist lyric, then perhaps even the mere attempt to lay the self bare is the best modern man can do. Perhaps it is not an issue of succeeding or failing, since the effort is predisposed to failure, but the attempt itself. Eliot states as much in "East Coker": "perhaps neither gain nor loss./For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business" (CP 203).

The argument which I am postulating for the emergence of the long lyrical epic in modernism is one which contests the view that the modernist long poem is radically discontinuous with its Wordsworthian and Whitmanian precursors. Despite its technical innovations--a paratactic structure, the intercutting of verse and prose, the collapse of historical time into an eternal present, the ironic juxtaposition of fragments--the modernist long poem of Pound, Eliot, Williams, Olson, and Berryman ultimately sustains a centralizing presence, the existence of which is vital to the form itself. As a genre, it insists that the center of presence be sustained regardless of surface discontinuity, heterogeneity, difference, and fragmentation; in short, only if belief in the self exists, even though it may never be fully materialized, can the fragments of reality be of any significance to the poet or the reader alike. The

mode of the lyrical epic is one which must not violate the lyric norm; hence, it is not discontinuous from its Romantic model--at least generically. Frye is partially correct when, in The Anatomy of Criticism, he states that "the paradoxical technique of the poetry which is encyclopedic and yet discontinuous, the technique of The Waste Land and of Ezra Pound's Cantos, is, like its direct opposite in Wordsworth, a technical innovation heralding a new mode" (61). Technically these poems were revolutionary, but the surface renovations did not alter the foundation stone: the central self. These poems, being montages of lyric, epic, travelogue, history, diary, and song, are essentially lyric poems.[7] Even though multiple voices echo and re-echo throughout The Cantos, for example, they are all assimilated by and funnelled through Pound's personal reading of history. The poem poses no doubt as to the reading with which Pound wishes to leave his readers, to leave, for it is as apparent in his poetic Cantos as it is in his prosaic Guide to Kulchur. Pound's often dogmatic opinions, which are to be our model, are obvious, direct, simple, and clearly on the surface.

In Marjorie Perloff's book, The Dance of the Intellect, she uses Pound's Cantos as the basis for an argument antithetical to the one presented here. Repeating with similar conviction Pound's belief that he would "Make it New," Perloff postulates that he broke the genealogical generic chain with its established conventions. "Modernism," Perloff notes, "in this context, means rupture" (14). The Cantos were a new genre because they dismantled existing generic codes and reassimilated them in a new mode, witnessed in the painting of that period, called "collage" (14, 16). Pound opposes Stevens, in Perloff's reading, in the same way that collage opposes organic form, and epic opposes lyric (16). Perloff's desire to

mark Pound as an innovator of a string of modern "poets" (Williams, Oppen, Beckett) who are freed for the first time from a metaphysics of presence is curiously undone in her own argument on Pound and Joyce's correspondence. She writes:

> Pound conceives of the page--whether it contains poem or prose text or letter--as a visual construct; increasingly in the Rapallo years, he begins to embellish the page with various designs and to use phonetic spelling, capitals, and underlinings for emphasis, unusual spacing and even lineation to create and to intensify his meanings. The process is, for that matter, not entirely different from what we find in The Cantos. (76)

and later,

> The text of the letter, like The Cantos themselves, occupies an equivocal space between speech and writing, one being played off against the other. (77)

The distinction between Pound's aesthetic, poetic discourse and his way of thinking, supposedly reflected in the prosaic letter, is collapsed, however, into a continuum called "Poundspeech" (78). The boundaries between aesthetic and epistolary communications are not erased because Pound establishes a paradigm of writing, which is what Perloff wants to claim, but because she and Pound alike reaffirm the logocentric desire of interpreting writing as secondary to (Pound)speech. By privileging speech (note Perloff's attention to Pound's oral devices) over writing, Perloff is contradicting herself. Pound's method in The Cantos may be technically revolutionary, but by sustaining a metaphysics of presence he is not "subordinating" genre to writing or "the appropriate phalanx of particulars" (Perloff 78). Pound's Cantos remain rigidly within the generic demands as established since the Romantics--to trace the mind of man.[8] The technical similarities between Pound's letters and his poems is evidence that his presence lies at the center of his

convoluted writing in whatever form it takes. Pound writes in Canto CXVI:

> Can you enter the great acorn of light?
> But the beauty is not the madness
> Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me.
> And I am not a demigod,
> I cannot make it cohere. (795-96)

Recognition of his own humanness means recognition of his implicit failure to make the self and its place cohere. The burden of the modern consciousness is that, despite one's willingness to "play" in the "wreckage" that is reality, one knows invariably that "the beauty is not the madness." Yet this knowledge never threatens Pound's Romantic belief in the existence of "the great acorn of light," his symbol for essence and being, which lies undauntingly at the heart of all.

III. The Stevensian Long Poem: In Defiance of Lyrical Authority

In my discussion over the past few pages I have posited a genealogical-generic line of poets, specifically focussing on Wordsworth through Whitman to Pound. My avoidance of Stevens has been intentional. My reasoning, which will supported in the subsequent analytical chapters, is that we cannot read Stevens' long poems after "The Comedian as the Letter C" in the same manner that we read The Waste Land, The Cantos, Paterson, The Bridge, The Maximus Poems, or Dream Songs. "Owl's Clover," "The Man With the Blue Guitar," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "Credences of Summer," "The Auroras of Autumn," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" are long poems, but they are not lyrical epics. What, I hope to determine, exactly constitutes a long poem? What assumptions lie unannounced in the "form" itself, if we may call it that? Do the formal assumptions, if there are any, correspond to or deviate significantly from authorial intention? The critical task of divulging what a particular genre is capable of

investigating is a crucial one. "From a poem's choice of a literary genre or mode of discourse," writes Tillotama Rajan in the Dark Interpreter, "it is often possible to infer the assumptions it is making a[illegible] the nature of the aesthetic medium" (23). In Metahistory, Hayden White insists that form is never ideologically innocent and, as a result, "commitment to a particular form of knowledge predetermines the kind of generalizations one can make about the present world" (21). Both Rajan and White divorce form from any singular authorial figure with his or her own attendant assumptions or intentions. For Rajan, a poem "chooses" its own mode of discourse, taking on a life of its own. For White, the individual exists in an historical context which governs the forms of knowledge available to him. Form bears within itself its own assumptions independent of and distinct from authorial intention; thus, the form a poem takes may create a context of radical irony if formal assumptions are antithetical to authorial assumptions.

The phenomenological wing of Stevensian criticism demonstrates a refusal to examine Stevens' long poems as a distinctive genre replete with its own assumptions, which may contest those of the author, for a very specific reason: their commitment is to the central cogito. Their insistence upon priorizing the authorial self as the center and source of meaning has led them repeatedly to ground Stevens' long poems in the lyric model. They assume that the long poem, like the individual lyrics which compose it, is a form which likewise perfectly fuses signified and signifier so that it speaks directly to man the author's exact feelings as captured and preserved intact within its autotelic structure. If Stevens claimed, as he did, that "Form has no significance except in relation to the reality that is being revealed" (OP 237), then it is mandatory that we understand what "reality" he is

interested in revealing. As all Stevensian phenomenologists are well aware, the "reality" that the poems reveal is the reality of the poet's evolving consciousness in its ongoing quest for the Supreme Fiction. The fact that Stevens repeats his disregard of form for content, or manner for matter, in "The Relation of Poetry to Painting," is critical:

> Let me divide modern poetry into two classes, one that is modern in respect to what it says, the other that is modern in respect to form...The first kind is interested in form but it accepts a banality of form as accidental to its language. Its justification is that in expressing thought or feeling in poetry the purpose of the poet must be to subordinate the mode of the expression, that while the value of the poem depends on expression, it depends primarily on what is expressed. (NA 167-68)

Echoing Stevens' personal commitment to this first class of modern poetry, the phenomenologists have likewise stressed what the poetry is "saying" (what it means to the poet and by extension his audience) and not the "accident" of form. Their interest lies in the depths of the poem--with the thinking mind--and not with the surface "exploitation" of form that amounts to "nothing more than the use of small letters for capitals, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation and similar aberrations" (NA 168).

While Stevens is here consciously differentiating his poetics from those of Pound and Williams particularly, who both relished in the surface "aberrations" that the typewriter could make to the printed page, the phenomenologists have read Stevens in the same way that they have read Pound or Williams. Although Stevens never wrote a poem as encyclopedic, extensive, or historical/autobiographical as The Cantos or Paterson, critics have tended to read his string of long poems as constituting a linear, teleological whole, expressive of a developing self at the center. Read from beginning to end these long poems constitute for the

phenomenologist a form akin to that of, say, Paterson, which one Williams critic defines as "the stream of [Paterson's] consciousness" (Breslin 182), or The Bridge, which Crane calls "an epic of modern consciousness" (CP 252).

Presence is centralized even in The Cantos. Michael Bernstein recognizes that "although the personal element structurally undermines the Cantos's central intentions" (182), it does help to unify the fragments of history and give them force. Defining Pound's Cantos as marginalizing the autonomous lyric voice so as to foreground the fiction of a sociolect narrating its own heritage, Bernstein then reverses the definition of the modern verse epic in a fashion that positions the authorial self at the center:

> I suppose what distinguishes a modern verse epic from its classical predecessors is the necessity, in a society no longer unified by a single, generally accepted code of values, of justifying its argument by the direct appeal of the author's own experiences and emotions. By the time of Paterson and The Maximus Poems, as we shall see, the pressure of the poet's particular situation had become one of the acknowledged conventions of the new verse epic. (180)

The "pressure of the poet's particular situation" had, however, been felt in verse epics long before Pound himself (much less Williams and Olson) when the Romantics sought to capture the mind's actions as they exist in historical time.

Modern historiographers explain that the appeal to the author as the authoritative center is inevitable even in, and especially in, texts including history. History is a perceived thing and, as Hans Georg Gadamer demonstrates in Truth and Method, that perception is inextricably circumscribed by the "historicalness of the knowing subject" (479-80). Similarly, Nietzsche's revolt against traditional historicism in The Use and Abuse of History is an analogous revolt against the assumption that it is possible to efface subjectivity in order to encounter the

objective. Michel Foucault explains the Nietzschean position: to achieve a "suprahistorical perspective" (as, I might add, it is Pound's proclivity to accomplish in The Cantos) is to sustain the illusion that the unity of one's own being is "sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (153). Traditional historicism aims to achieve "an ideal continuity--as a teleological movement or a natural process" (154), but in actuality, it is only a "pretended continuity" (154). To sustain the myth of objectivity, as Pound does I would add, is only "consoling play" (153) that is "possible...because of [one's] belief in the eternal truth, the immortality of the soul, and the nature of consciousness as always identical to itself" (152). Even history, which includes Pound's historical account, is subject to the subject who writes history as he perceives it.

It is this inescapability of the subject, even in Pound's "poem including history" or Williams' history of a more particular locale, that enables Stevens critics to read his long poems as they would The Cantos or Paterson, even though they never call Stevens' poems by the same generic title--lyrical epics. From "Comedian as the Letter C" through to "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the phenomenologists see Stevens as writing the history of his thoughts as they surface in time. The fragments, lapses, or fissures between poems are all manageable because they assume that it is the nature of consciousness to be "always identical to itself." To divulge the "truth" of history --be it universal or personal--is, ultimately, a naive quest for origin. The origin of an historical reading of self or place rests in the self, and, on this basis, Stevens' long poems as a whole have been treated by the phenomenologists as though they comprise a lyrical-epic. Criticism has levelled the two forms and, consequently, Stevens' long poems are taught in academic

courses that focus more precisely on the lyrical epics of Pound, Williams, Crane, and so forth. To level the two forms and yet not to call them by the same generic title is, I feel, an attempt to repress a critical generic difference, as well as an attempt to allow the presiding consciousness a position of central authority in all writing be it historical, epical, or lyrical. Rather than recognize and allow formal differentiation to exist, the phenomenologists have made all writing lyrical.

The dismantling of lyric consciousness has been the concern of the following generation of critics: Jacques Derrida, Paul De Man, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman. By putting pressure on the logocentric assumptions of the lyric form as read by the phenomenologists, these deconstructionists wish to show the form's instability by declaring the center of all writing to be unstable. As long as we still live in the "epoch of the logos" (OG 12)[9] when difference between speech and writing, signified and signifier, inside and outside is established and hierarchized, Derrida argues that we are abiding by a metaphysics of presence, which connotes "absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning" (12). The conventional privileging of speech as the model of direct communication serves to render writing as a bastardized form of communication, a form that is twice removed from voice/meaning, making it a representation (writing) of a representation (speech). Writing is thus regarded as secondary to speech because it is always marked by the absence of the speaker; when the speaker is not physically present to clarify what he means, writing is then open and vulnerable to misinterpretation by the reader(s). In order to delyricize discourse by challenging the privileged center, Derrida (in particular), reversed the hierarchy by refusing to regard writing as a derivative technique whose sole function

is to represent speech. For Derrida this "reversal" is inevitable because speech is always already writing. Both speech and writing partake inescapably of the condition of linguistic signs which are repeatable and, hence, open to misunderstanding. Speech becomes a form of writing, as opposed to writing being a derivative form of speech or a parasitic means of representing voice by being added on to speech. Both speech and writing become, for Derrida, categories within the larger language realm of archi-écriture or protowriting.

Just as Derrida's deconstruction of Rousseau resulted in the inversion of the hierarchy between speech and writing, I wish to posit a new reading of Stevens' long poems (and for long poems generally) which will disrupt the phenomenologists' privileging and equating of the extended lyric with the process of being or becoming. While Derrida challenges the privileging of speech, I shall be challenging the ontology of the lyric, which has become the principal model for how to read the modern long poem. It is my contention that Poe is correct--long poems are a series of lyrics strung together by narrative. However, I feel that it is time to invert the logocentric hierarchy implicit in the phenomenological desire to read long poems as extended lyrical moments expressive of the growth of the self or the shifting moods of the speaker as a unified consciousness, a reading which subordinates the narrative dimension as parasitical and supplementary.

To date, the phenomenological readings of Stevens' poems have repeatedly given priority to his long poems because it is a form capable of synthesizing the multiplicity of particulars expressed in the individual lyrics. Like the governing mind behind the work, the long poem is usually regarded as being able to bind and stabilize disparate lyrical moments into its wholeness; hence, the long poem is a

lyric--only with duration. What the critical positions of Vendler, Riddel, Miller, Litz, and Bloom imply, in Derridean terms, is that the long poems supplement the brief lyrics. Remember that none of Stevens' long poems was published separately; consequently, they cohabit with the lyrics in each volume. Peaceful cohabitation between these two forms is possible because the phenomenological stance levels out their differences and treats both forms as fundamentally lyrical discourses. The long poems are interpreted as things complete in themselves, just as the individual lyrics are viewed as aesthetic wholes. When Vendler claims, as I quoted earlier, that the long poems "form the illumined large to which the lyrics, volume by volume, attach themselves" (OEW 2) or when Riddel claims that the "minor pieces" are "magisterially" gathered up into the long poem's embracing form (CE 10), they are arguing that the long poems supplement the lyrics and vice versa. The long poem is, in their view, an addition to the lyrical form because it is summative, more complete, a collection.[10] The phenomenological position is such that while the lyrics remain fully self-sufficient, when merged into the long poem, these particulars are gathered up and displayed more completely or adequately.

In Of Grammatology, Derrida explains this position in terms of speech as presence and writing as supplement: "The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence" (144). Just as Rousseau argued that "Languages are made to be spoken, writing serves only as a supplement to speech" (OG 144), so the phenomenologists claim that the long poem serves to supplement the lyric. What we realize is that the analogy being drawn suffers from a gap. Analyzing Rousseau, Derrida claimed that writing supplemented (added itself to) speech. In

like fashion, I have argued that the traditionalist critics have posited that the long poem supplements the lyric. We cannot say, however, that long poem equals writing and lyric equals speech, while at the same time saying that the long poem is the same as the lyric only longer, because writing is not the same as speech. The phenomenological argument suppresses the notion of the long poem as writing: it suppresses difference (long poem does not equal lyric) in the name of unity (long poem equals lyric). Rather than face the otherness that is the long poem, they repress its alterity by calling it that with which they are most familiar.

By way of example, we need only look again at Helen Vendler's arguments. The primary title of Vendler's On Extended Wings itself implies that long poems are "extended" lyrics. Her subtitle, "Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems," also reinforces her interpretation that these poems are not different in kind, but only in degree, which is to say that they are merely longer than his "normal" lyrics. For Vendler, Stevens' long poems are not dissimilar in form from his lyrics, because they are lyrics at base; therefore, rather than give us one expression of Stevens' feelings, the long poems give us many lyrics and many feelings, which together form his "world" and "naturalize us in it" (17). Implicit in her syntax and diction is the notion that long poems supplement the lyrics solely by addition:

> so we may be forgiven also if we say he invites this, he avoids that, he shrinks from this, he is shocked by this, he is indifferent to something else, he is consoled by these things. This is not censure, it is a classification in the human world. (7)

Her syntax is one of accumulation or addition, and it is enhanced by her use of the word "classification." In her reading, addition is possible because the long poem extends the lyrical function: the signified is foregrounded in such a fashion that language becomes the transparent medium through which the speaker's voice and

presence is centered and knowable. Vendler's argument epitomizes the phenomenological insistence on "supplement-as-addition" as a means to unity. Therefore, each long poem is composed of a series of lyrics which the form unites so as to present the large view of Stevens at a particular time in his life and, if all of his long poems are added up, we get an even larger picture of Stevens in his "world," which is equally a symbol for "the human world."

The phenomenological interpretation of the long poem is, like Rousseau's reading of the function of speech, only half acceptable. Derrida explains that "the concept of supplement...harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary" (OG 144). The supplement is an extra, added to that which is already considered to be complete, but it is added because that which is supposed to be internally complete is not self-sufficient. In short, Derridean thinking has shown us that supplements are additions, but they are also substitutions. The necessary second signification of supplement is that

> the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills it is as if one fills a void. If it represents or makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence...As a substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. (145)

Just as Derrida frees writing from being a mere supplement to speech, because "the 'original', 'natural' etc. language had never existed, never been intact and untouched by writing, that it had itself always been a writing" (OG 56), so am I aiming to free the long poem from being a mere supplement to the lyric. The long poem is not simply the whole wherein the particulars are collected; in Stevens' case, by extension, it is not "simply enlargements and proliferations of his earlier images" (Riddel, CE 5). To repeat, I feel it is time to consider the long poem as

occupying that place in Stevens's canon which is a "mark of emptiness." It is no longer possible to see the long poem solely as a mere addition to the lyrics or to define it as an extended lyric, for to do so is to reiterate the logocentric desire to grant priority to a speaking voice when none is presently present. It is no longer possible to assume synthesis instantly and willfully, for to do so is to blind ourselves to the questions Derrida is forcing us to ask. The phenomenologists' repeated privileging of speech over writing emerges when they postulate as the trope for the long poem a mind capable of holding within itself diverse particulars. Since Derrida, it is time to invert the hierarchy and to face, as opposed to repress, the alterity that is the long poem.

Like Derrida, we must now consider the second signification of supplement--substitution--which cohabits with addition. Stevens did not abandon his usual lyric form in his later volumes, but the later volumes testify that for some reason the lyric form required the long poem to supplement its fictions. The volumes after Harmonium reflect a greater equilibrium between the mere space accommodating lyrics and long poems. This blending of forms serves to dismantle the assumptions of the first volume, which grants privilege to the lyric voice and, in doing so, implies the logocentric valorization of speech over writing. The reader is no longer encouraged to see each volume as a group of lyrics which culminate in the central long poem. Instead, we see two forms that are blended and yet do not fully merge. The one (lyric) does not simply become (grow into) the other (long poem). The two forms placed in the context of one another do not create a monologue, as the phenomenological stance implies, but a dialogue: their relationship is already marked by difference. It appears that the long poem exists both as an addition to

the lyrics and as a supplement to the lyric form, which is marked by an absence that needs to be filled. In short, while it is the intention of the lyric form to achieve a unified voice, whether the lyric exists outside or inside the long poetic form, it continually does so in the context of the long poem which undoes its hermeneutical idealism. The long poem sets the pure lyric voice into a context best imaged as the Stevensian crystal--a context which opens, disperses, and dialogizes what was once seen as closed, centered, and monologic.

As a supplement to the lyric impulse outside of it and within it, the long poem is a form marked by difference or otherness. "Whether it adds or substitutes itself," Derrida writes, "the supplement is exterior, outside of the positivity to which it is super-added, alien to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it" (OG 145). It is into this arena of difference that we must theoretically advance rather than retreat into the argument that posits the lyric as the origin of the long poem, and the long poem as the logical extension (organic outgrowth?) of the lyric (a position which suppresses difference by assuming one form is the extension of the other). By taking Stevens' cue that form is secondary to meaning, the phenomenologists have disregarded fundamental questions about the form of the long poem and, hence, categorized it by that which they knew. But, as Nietzsche claims in The Will to Power,

> the supposed instinct for causality is only fear of the unfamiliar and the attempt to discover something familiar in it--a search, not for causes, but for the familiar. (297)

If the long poem is a form which is built of lyrics held together by narrative, as Poe contends, then the phenomenological emphasis on the first aspect of the form--lyric--has been at the cost of suppressing the second aspect--narrative.

This narrative dimension is critical because it serves to dismantle lyric autotelism by intertextualizing it within a larger language context. It is within the context of the long poem that the individual, autonomous utterance is most threatened. While it may be the intention of the form to produce, as Stevens claimed in "The Comedian as the Letter C," one man thinking and hence being for a long period of time, the form may actually accomplish something quite different. We can only address the otherness of this form and comprehend its own assumptions if we resist the phenomenological or logocentric impulse to ground it in the myth of the stable, consistent center of the self. By freeing the long poem from its former imprisonment by a privileged authorial self, it can take on an existence independent of lyric assumptions. The critical function becomes not the hypnotic repetition of the author's viewpoint or life experiences, but an engagement with the complex play between authorial intention and the long poems' independent accomplishments.

To transfer a theory of the long poem out of phenomenology and into post-structuralism, the isolated lyric voice is let loose into a larger narrative context that challenges and decenters its autonomy. This larger context--the site of the long poem--is marked by otherness. While the lyric is interior and monologic, the long poem is exterior and dialogic as it simultaneously presents multiple, chaotic, and conflicting discourses. While the lyric is aesthetically unified, the long poem is a site riddled with differences that refuse to be subjugated to the authority of any single center. The lyric differs from this narrative/dramatic form, according to Sharon Cameron in Lyric Time, as follows:

> Unlike the drama, whose province is conflict, and unlike the novel or narrative, which connects isolated moments of time to create a story multiply peopled and framed by a social context, the lyric

> voice is solitary and generally speaks out of a single moment in time...its propensity [is] to interiorize as ambiguity or outright contradiction those conflicts that the other mimetic forms conspicuously exteriorize and then allocate to discrete characters who enact them in the manifest pull of opposite points of view. (23)

By virtue of its duration, however, the long poem enters the stream of time. Throughout the writing/reading of a long poem, time marks the passage of a series of events, which may be presented in a fragmented, plotless fashion but which nevertheless achieve a linearity or a narrative line. The lyric discourse, grounded on the unified cogito, is thrown outside of itself within the long poem, which is an environment constituted by a diversity of voices. The long poem is the most sufficing form for the dramatization of this central conflict: the privileged individual lyric utterance set in and against a narrative context which intertextualizes it and disperses it in a theatre of tropes. Only in the long poem as Stevens practiced it could he dramatize this very conflict, which he called "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36). Although refusing to recognize it as such, Stevens' conflict is a conflict of form. Stevens, that "scholar of one candle" (CP 417), had to open the door of his tight lyrical form to face the outside world, signified by the auroras' theatrical display of heterogeneity which both terrifies and dwarfs him.

The long poem is the letting loose of the lyric voice in a larger narrative context; hence, as a genre, it sits, more precisely, in the gap between the lyric and the novel, as opposed to the epic. Like the novel, the long poem's "discourse lives on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" (284), according to Mikhail Bakhtin in The Dialogic Imagination. The undecidability of the long poem as a genre is crucial, because it "defines" itself by defying the

borders of traditional generic stratification. When the spatial timeless moment of the lyric[11] is brought into the temporal world of the long poem, the border lines are crossed or trespassed upon. The closure necessary to sustain monologic stability becomes radically disturbed by the besiegement of multiple discourses that contaminate its purity with their otherness.

What I am suggesting here--that the long poem is marked by the simultaneous co-presence of lyric and narrative--is problematical for most modernists. Since Poe, poetry has come to be identified with the lyrical expression of one's emotions crystallized in their timelessness. Prose, narration, and the novel were relegated to the opposite end of the generic trajectory. The modernist hierarchy of pure poetry set over and above vulgar narration led to the phenomenological suppression of narrational qualities in the long poem, which they chose to read as "extended lyrics." Yet the long poem seriously challenges the modernist assumption of generic polarization because, within itself, it brings the monologic into a dialogic context. Using a trope of disease, Bakhtin would call this dismantling of the traditional deep structures that are used to categorize generic boundaries an "infection" process (xxxii). When the novel "reigns supreme," Bakhtin notes that the other genres become infected by it and, in turn, become "novelized" (6), a process of moving toward the novel's anti-generic nature. Although Bakhtin does not discuss the long poem specifically, his theory of novelization is illuminating if we re-consider the long poem as the novelization of the lyric. For Bakhtin, to novelize the lyric, or for that matter any genre, would be to puncture its metaphysical or transcendent assumptions (such as the lyric's assumption of the self as a pure transcendent ego) and to bring it into direct contact

with reality, the world-in-the-making. Novelized genres, writes Bakhtin, are predominantly characterized by their insistence on process and inconclusiveness (7). The introduction of process, becoming, openendedness, indeterminacy, dialogized language, laughter and irony, and commitment to a still-evolving present is what makes the novel and novelized genres ultimately resistant to the closure which is implicit in generic categorization.

The writing of long poems, which refuse to be either lyrics or personalized epics, became Stevens' mature project. Despite his seeming intentions to write long poems expressive of one man thinking and thus being throughout time, the form itself delyricizes the individual utterance by placing it within the larger language world. The long poem is the site of the dramatization of this clash: centripetal lyric forces repeatedly pulled apart by centrifugal narrative forces. And it is this clash that instigates a series of hierarchical collapses: lyric/narrative, inside/outside, monologic/ dialogic, private language/historicity of language, linear form/ polyphonic form, speech/writing, Truth/truths, and so forth. In this revised reading of the long poem as a "genre," the long work inverts and destroys the logocentric hierarchies as it sustains them. Thus, it brings us to the Derridean concept of writing, described by Terry Eagleton in Literary Theory as contestation:

> the advent of the concept of writing...is a challenge to the very idea of structure: for a structure always presumes a centre, a fixed principle, a hierarchy of meanings and a solid foundation, and it is just these notions which the endless differing and deferring of writing throws into question. (129)

To read the long poem as a site of dramatization means that the text's rhetoric is no longer the sole possession of the privileged authorial self, because each word is "born into an environment already aswarm with names" (Bakhtin xx). The single

holistic language of presence is now, therefore, seen as a force resisting the play of continually deferring signs engaged in the otherness of pre-existent, even alien, meanings.

While the context of the long poem may delyricize or de-center the lyric impulse it does not, as Barbara Godard argues, mean the death of the lyric (318). Rather, the life of the long form depends on the contestation between the will of the lyric self "to be" in a heteroglot context that will deconstruct it. Likewise, to say that the lyric voice exists in the long poem is not to concede to the phenomenological reading that the long poem is a fundamentally lyric discourse. The long poem can achieve what the isolated lyric cannot: it alone can create a larger context replete with alien or conflicting discourses, capable of undoing the individual utterance that is contextless. At the same time that the long poetic structure undoes lyric autonomy, it fortifies it by saving the lyric from solipsistic suffocation (the Romantics' impending fear of a "soul self-consumed" [Shelley, PW 146]). The long poem is a dialogue of differences with no still center.

Moving into the realm of the long poem was for Stevens what going North was for Crispin. In order to capture reality, his poetics had to become a "rude aesthetic" (CP 36), which entailed his making "the one/Discovery still possible to make" (CP 36): taking firm hold of "the essential prose" of the world even if "prose should wear a poem's guise at last" (CP 36). After Harmonium, Stevens' later volumes increasingly reflect a weaning from the securities of lyric centers, and the resultant novelized form is a "form gulping after formlessness" (CP 411). As he progressively delyricizes discourse by pressing the individual voice into the heteroglossia[12], the larger prosaic world, his form exposes the monologic unitary

voice to be already intertextualized, dialogized, plural, and in contestation with the alterity of the other.[13] The promise of unity is endlessly elaborated and yet, simultaneously and necessarily, endlessly deferred. The long poem itself militates against ever reaching a stabilized conclusion, a telos which will shed light upon the parts and make them whole. Since Stevens' "endlessly elaborating" long poems participate in the larger language context, and since language is never transparent but caught in many antithetical and irreconcilable meanings, the differences within the form can never be healed over or cured. Such incurable fissures do not necessarily make the long poem a "maze prison," but they do make it a maze or, as Stevens would have it, a "Theatre/Of Trope" (CP 397), a site of the unending play of metaphoricity.

The dramatic struggle within the long poem goes beyond the will of the lyrical self to endure "a kind/Of volatile world" (CP 397) unscathed by its insistent self-deconstruction. By extension, the drama also implicates the reader, who is yet an "other" voice situated outside of the text. When confronted with change, difference, and centerlessness, what is the reader's role? David Walker's The Transparent Lyric is an attempt to teach us how to read both Stevens and Williams Carlos Williams in a fashion that will free us from the phenomenological insistence on the coherent and fully determined presence of the author. With the principle aim of undoing Helen Vendler's ironic reading of Stevens' poems, Walker posits the notion of "the rhetoric of transparence to turn personal experience outward and make it immediately accessible to the reader" (187). Words in a poem are, for Walker, a transparent medium through which the distanced reader is able to experience the poetic experience first-hand as if through a "disembodied voice" (31).

This method enabled poets "to represent the process of consciousness without centering it subjectively" (161).

Walker's desire to widen the gap between the Romantics and the Moderns (10), as a shift from the internal to the external and from a poetics of unity to poetics of the fragment and inconclusiveness (23), may at first glance appear to be the appropriate way to read the long poem as I have described it. Walker even acknowledges that, unlike Vendler who felt narrative progress was "uncongenital to [Stevens'] mind" (OEW 54), Stevens does repeatedly include narrative and dramatic elements in his lyrical poems (56). While my reading of the long poems is akin to Walker's, in that both readings dispel the notion of a consistent lyrical speaker, my interpretation of the true free play of the long poem or any text entails a more radical "undecidability" than Walker acknowledges. For Walker, difference in the text is ultimately stabilized because "the meaning of the poem is not primarily in any abstract statement derived from it, but in the reading experience itself" (31). Therefore, when he argues that the reader must now become "the dramatic center of the poem" (146), he may be decentering the poem from Vendler's guiding poetic consciousness, but only so as to recenter it on the outside--in the reader. Walker has not rejected the notion of a center; he has merely "moved" it (146).

David Walker understands difference to be assimilated into a dialectic of contraries which the reader is to synthesize into monologic equilibrium (149). Like the speaker in "The Idea of Order at Key West," Walker's reader is to "[invest the poem] imaginatively with a meaning it does not otherwise have" (24). "Somehow," through the reading process, "the chaos of two songs is resolved into the unity of one" (24). By including difference into his dialectic of opposites, Walker

contradicts himself by re-establishing what he wants to see modernism as doing away with--a Romantic nostalgia for origin or unity within diversity.

J. Hillis Miller's deconstruction of Joseph Riddel's reading of Williams Carlos Williams in The Inverted Bell (1974) is equally applicable to Walker's theory of the transparent lyric. Miller writes,

> Opposition of difference understood in this sense [like Walker or Riddel], however, implies the acceptance of the law of non-contradiction. It can easily be assimilated into a dialectic of contraries and so returned back to some monological reading. The heterogeneity of a text (and so its vulnerability to deconstruction) lies rather in the fact that it says two entirely incompatible things at the same time. Or rather, it says something which is capable of being interpreted in two irreconcilable ways. It is 'undecidable'. One way is referential (there is an origin), and the deconstruction of this referentiality (there is no origin, only the freeplay of linguistic substitution). ("Deconstructing the Deconstructers" 30)

Stevens' long poems, or for that matter any text, cannot be read as transparent lyrics because language is not and never can be "transparent." Language exists in a context, as Bakhtin reminds us; and, consequently, "the life of any text is made up of such irresolvable oscillations of meaning" (Miller, "Deconstructing the Deconstructors" 31). Heterogeneity cannot be made to "settle down," not even by the reader. Only when the reader forsakes the consoling urge for synthesis of the parts into the ideal whole can he or she learn to find pleasure in this delightfully dialogical form riddled with gaps, multiplicity, difference, and discontinuousness. Endless elaboration and endless deferral of a télos or meaning is the "poverty" of the "reality" of the long poem. The incessant teasing of such "free(fore)play" is all there is, and we must learn to take pleasure in it alone because, as Stevens himself tells us (although slow to learn this himself) "the bride/Is never naked" (CP 396).[14]

ENDNOTES

[1]In I Wanted to Write a Poem, William Carlos Williams also names Keats' "Endymion" as the work he first began to imitate when beginning his own poetic career while at the University of Pennsylvania: "In writing a poem, I was consciously copying--not Pound--but Keats" (6).

[2]Pressured by his duties at work and his desire to write poetry, Stevens often felt disturbed by his lack of time for the latter: "It is very difficult for me to find the time to write poetry, and most of these ["Like Decorations"] have been written on the way to and from the office" (L 272).

[3]Describing the form of his "Myth of America"--The Bridge--in a letter to Otto Kahn, Crane writes:

> For each section of the entire poem has presented its own unique problem of form, not alone in relation to the materials embodied within its separate confines, but also in relation to the other parts, in series, of the major design of the entire poem. Each is a separate canvas, as it were, yet none yields its entire significance when seen apart from the others. One might take the Sistine Chapel as an analogy. (CP 249)

[4]In keeping with Whitman's epic concern to capture man in his times, Pound was also drawn to the issue of culture. In the Guide to Kulchur, he asserts: "No conception of culture will hold good if you omit the enduring constants in human composition" (47).

[5]In an interview with Cynthia Haythe, Ammons explains that the lyric form limited him to "the single thing in its essentiality" (189).

[6]In a letter to Harriet Munroe, Hart Crane also speaks of the power of underlying emotion to unify fragmented imagery in poems: "it often happens that images, themselves totally dissociated, when joined in the circuit of a particular emotion located with specific relation to both of them, conduce to great vividness and accuracy of statement in defining that emotion" (CP 238).

[7]In The Theory of the Novel, Georg Lukács claims that in minor epic forms it is the narrator's "own subjectivity that singles out a fragment from the immeasurable infinity of the events of life, endows it with independent life and allows the whole from which this fragment has been taken to enter the work only as the thoughts and feelings of his hero...this selection, this delimitation, puts the stamp of its origin in the subject's will and knowledge upon the work itself: it is, more or less, lyrical in nature" (50-51).

[8]After writing this section, I came across an equivalent argument by David Simpson in his article entitled "Pound's Wordsworth; or Growth of a Poet's Mind." Beginning with a catalogue of the numerous ways by which Pound attempted to disrupt the inherited Romantic Aesthetic, Simpson sees Pound as returning full-circle to this aesthetic (660). In short, while Pound intended to write an objective, natural history, The Cantos finally "present themselves quite consciously as the meditations

of a particular mind within history, with all its idiosyncracies and commitments to locality, place, and time" (682-83). The Cantos is Pound's Romantic autobiography.

[9]Derrida explains the "epoch of the logos" as not being historically definable, so that "belonging or not belonging" is subtle and indefinite (OG 12). It is an epoch wherein

> reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos. Even when the thing, the 'referent', is not immediately related to the logos of a creator God where it began by being spoken/thought sense, the signified has at any rate an immediate relationship with the logos in general (finite or infinite), and a mediated one with the signifier, that is to say with the exteriority of writing. (14-15)

[10]When speaking of "The Comedian as the Letter C" in the context of Harmonium, Litz writes: "No other poem is so much the property of Harmonium, where it acts as center and summation" (IV 139). Rajeev Patke reiterates the same argument: "the unity and sustained length of the poem make it admirably suitable for the role of a conspectus, a record and summation of the various stages of Stevens' poetic evolution" (LP 31).

[11]See Joseph Frank's seminal essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in The Widening Gyre (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963), pp. 3-62. First published in three successive numbers of The Sewanee Review in 1945.

[12]Bakhtin defines the heteroglossia as "The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text...all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve" (428).

[13]Derrida's terminology is evoked here in the word "alterity" which, as the translator of Speech and Phenomena tells us, is implicated in his notion of difference. David B. Allison writes that "Like its French equivalent, alterité the term is rich in connotations (to alter, to alternate, alternation, alternative, alteration, alter ego, etc.), and it has fewer ethical or personal overtones than other possible translations, such as 'otherness' " (xi).

[14]In a 1935 letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, Stevens wrote that "Poetry is like everything else; it cannot be made suddenly to drop all its rags and stand out naked, fully disclosed. Everything is complicated; if that were not so, life and poetry and everything else would be a bore" (L 303).

CHAPTER II

"THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER C: A REPETITION OF WHAT WAS IN THE SCRIPT

> "Why must I think that almost all,
> no, all the methods and conventions
> of art today are good for parody only?"
>
> Thomas Mann
> Doctor Faustus

I. The Site of a Canonical Fissure

When thinking of the unique place of "The Comedian" in Stevens' poetic mundo, I am inclined to think of J. Hillis Miller's recollection of Nietzsche's image of the Janus-faced gateway in Thus Spake Zarathustra. Nietzsche's parable, which enfolds Zarathustra's parable to those explorers who have "embarked with cunning sails on unexplored seas" (Portable 270; Zara 190-93), provides us with an inescapable figuration for Stevens' poem (figuration is inescapable because there is no originating presence but only images behind images). Describing the gateway to the dwarf, Zarathustra explains that the gateway is the point of intersection for two paths, one of which leads eternally to the past and the other eternally to the future. The gateway named "Moment" functions as a bridge: it links the past moment to the not yet future moment. But the gate is Janus-faced. The point of intersection is always already the point of the fissure. The bridge that opens one moment to the next is simultaneously closed; hence, it underscores the inescapable gap that perpetually divides that which was from that which is yet to be. Afraid of his "own thoughts and the thoughts behind [his] thoughts" (270), Zarathustra demands that the dwarf he carried recognize that these two paths "contradict each other ...they offend each other face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come

together" (269-70). The gateway, the fleeting moment, unites and ruthlessly divides. It is a bridge which is yet a wall. Being Janus-faced, the gateway as moment is the place of perpetual contradiction and oscillation.[1]

"The Comedian" engages in this same problematic. It marks, paradoxically, both a beginning and an end for Stevens: it was Stevens' first major long poem and his last long poem in the quest mode of the Romantics. Consequently, the poem bears a double inscription, as does Nietzsche's gateway. While it is inscribed as the entrance into Stevens' experiments with the long form, the inscription can simultaneously be read as the exit. Thirteen years intervened before the already middle-aged poet published another long poem.[2] To many "The Comedian" became the coda, the end or climax, of Stevens' noteworthy first volume, Harmonium.[3] Or is the coda actually a commencement? For readers of this persuasion, "The Comedian" bears the traces of a poet of promise and strength, although he had only begun to find his voice. Does the poem herald a grand finale to a now perfected form or is it the harbinger of a dawning new form? These issues can no more be resolved than can the paths at Nietzsche's gateway, which are eternally self-contradictory.

As a gateway, this first long poem admits one into Stevens' later long poems, which is why so many critics begin with a consideration of "The Comedian." Simultaneously, however, the poem is also a wall or barrier that fails to lead us into the later long works. This poem "sharply stop[s]" (CP 44) the reader because learning to read this first long poem will not teach him or her how to read the post-Harmonium long poems. On the other hand, the poem is a pivotal point of union to the later Stevens, in spite of his virtual silence from 1924 to

1930. As it reinstates the canon into an aggregate so, too, does it underscore the incurable gouge/gap that wounds the canon. It posits a context of difference which cannot be concealed, suppressed, or subdued. The poem is located at the Janus-faced moment: a beginning and an end, an entrance and an exit, a commencement and a coda, a bridge and a wall, a point of union and of ineradicable difference ad infinitum.

Although Stevens claimed "to regard poetry as a form of retreat" (L 230), what began as amusement "on a large scale" (L 231) left this aging ephebe an "exhausted realist" (OP 24). The summer of 1922 saw him transform his first version--"From the Journal of Crispin"--into its final form as "The Comedian" (L 229).[4] When no further poetry was published for the next six years, Stevens' "retreat" was reinterpreted as a retirement. For critics like Yvor Winters, this post-"Sunday Morning" poet should have been as heroic as his persona Crispin and retired from his hedonistic frolic long before the "The Comedian," which he refers to as Stevens' "mediation upon the possibility of renunciation" (Ehrenpreis 127). Others, like Samuel French Morse, explain the discontinuity in Stevens' productivity in terms of the pressures of the "business" of life superseding the pressure for imaginative forays (Wallace Stevens 138-42); hence, it indicates a suspended lapse in the balance that Stevens insisted upon (NA 36). For Kermode, the strain of producing this long work was almost physical as opposed to metaphysical: "one sometimes thinks of it ["The Comedian"] less as a poem than as a remarkable physical feat" (Ehrenpreis 246). Perhaps this long work usurped him of such excessive rhetorical energy that the forty-three year old poet was "washed away" by his own "magnitude" (CP 28). Whatever it was that "The Comedian" extirpated

from Stevens, it did not leave him paralyzed. For the next (and last) fifteen years of his poetic life, he returned so repeatedly to the form of the long poem that it became a salient feature in every subsequent volume.

Stevens did return to the long poetic form after "The Comedian," but it was repetition with a difference: the ground for his new form had shifted. Consequently, the string of long poems that succeed "The Comedian" are pronouncedly different from it. Understandably, we generally assume that it is easier to comprehend where a poet "ends up" if we know where he began (a faulty but stubborn assumption rooted in the notion of an originary presence).[5] In an attempt to swerve away from the illusion of causation[6] and any kind of developmental metaphor, which would imply a progression from weaker early poems to better later poem, I would suggest only that we recognize the distinct differences in form, intent, and assumed ground.[7] This difference is underscored by the literal gap in his career, a gap of silence that lasted for more than half a decade. When Stevens returned to the long form, he never again committed himself to the allegorical-autobiographical narrative form of his "Comedian" poem. To have repeated that commitment to the Romantic quest form would have doubly committed him to a ground that his later poems resist and undermine. Paradoxically, then, Stevens had to travel the path to the past in order to reach the path headed for the future.

In a structurally mimetic fashion, I should like to forestall momentarily a close reading of "The Comedian" so as to reiterate my claims about "The Comedian" seen in the context of the post-Harmonium long poems. As I have said, from the 1930's onward Stevens' long poems unabashedly reject the allegorical

narrative of his first quest poem. Yet it would be erroneous to grant "The Comedian," in spite of its singularity in Stevens' canon, the privilege of an originary event or starting point. It is an image of an earlier image, and of an even earlier image. The form of the poem hearkens back to the lyrical epic models as ensconced in the romantic aesthetic of Whitman, Emerson, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, and so forth, even to their predecessors. Like his American and British forefathers, Stevens grounds his poem on the antecedent condition of the centrality of a developing (poetic) self. Such diverse poems as The Prelude and even The Cantos share with "The Comedian" this same ground: the affirmation of the strong self. It is surely this notion of the self as bedrock which leads Harold Bloom to reinstate Stevens "in the company of Romantic visionaries," because he repeats their post-Enlightenment "figures of will" in the Emersonian sense of power, vitality, and the everlasting "Yea" (PC 25, 33). Despite the doubleness of Crispin and the ironic narrator in "The Comedian," doubleness collapses into the center of the unified self, which is Stevens as he jeeringly mimics his own earlier style.[8]

To read this poem, or for that matter any text, "ethically" is to be obliged "to the text and what the text does to you" (J. Miller, "Search for Grounds" 92). It appears then that the form of the text must be considered seriously, even though much modern literature experiments in mergers of the various genres or collapses them together indistinguishably. The Romantics' eclipse of the epical and lyrical responses, by internalizing the broad historical spectrum of the former so as to produce a history of the self, is reiterated in "The Comedian." The ingredients are immediately recognizable: the questing poet-persona, the sea voyage and trip inland, the temporal nature of his thought processes as they occur, his return "home"

signalled by an acknowledgement of his self-identity. Critics have faithfully responded to the form of the text, which demands that it be read in a certain way. Repeatedly critics have interpreted this work as a "veiled autobiography" (Vendler, OEW 54), a voyage of self-discovery akin to the "confessional fictions of the Romantics's quest for the self" (Litz, IV 120), and, like The Prelude, a "literary biography, the history of the poet's mind" (Sukenick, WS 47). The central governing fiction of the poet's evolving consciousness, for which Crispin is a mask for Stevens, finds its most appropriate form in that particularly Romantic genre--the lyrical epic. And, by extension, "The Comedian" formally, semantically, and rhetorically gestures that it be decoded as such.

Stevens' often repeated adage that "A change of style is a change of subject" (OP 171) can be broadened without misrepresentation to imply that a change of form necessitates a change in reading. The long poems that Stevens began writing thirteen years after "The Comedian" were most unlike his first "travelogue" of the poetic consciousness and must be read in a distinctly different manner. Discussion of how his post-Harmonium long poems evoke a larger language context that threatens to dismantle lyric autotelism will be the preoccupying concern of the remaining chapters. In these poems, which are generically indeterminate, we can no longer read for unity as promised by a presupposed unified consciousness, which is the sine qua non of the Romantic quest form. Together with the banishment of the auto- biographical quest form went the ground in the self. After "The Comedian," Stevens' long poems can no longer be read with the assurance of any stable ground, not even the Romantic belief in the self. They teach us to read not phenomenologically for the central consciousness, but deconstructively for the play

between a series of ever-receding and constantly displacing signs. As suggested earlier, these later poems perform their own deconstruction by splintering, fragmenting, and dialogizing that which was once closed, singular, and monologic. They signal a shift away from consciousness to language itself replete with all its rhetorical twists and turns that debar the direct transmission of referential meaning.

Reading deconstructively does not suggest that the later long works abrogate the lyric voice absolutely. In the context of the heterogeneous discourses which constitute this larger language sphere, however, the lyric voice is unabatingly threatened.[9] Caught in the colourful storm of conflicting discourses--as delightful and terrifying as the display of Stevens' auroras--the slight, pure, lyric voice faces the possibility of its own potential dissemination or irrevocable destruction. The relationship between the lyric voice and its place in a context that would delyricize it is devious, indeed. In such poems the lyric voice confronts that which is alien and exterior to it only to find that their difference cannot be negotiated into any form of synthesis. The potential survival of the lyric voice becomes contingent then upon its ability to embrace difference. As the form of these later long poems is no longer modelled on the Romantic's lyrical epic, but on something distinctly different, we can no longer read them in the same fashion. This new form is not grounded upon the self of the writer or his consciousness. As the poems become increasingly decentralized, the form they take can no longer be interpreted as constituting a "poetic world which has taken on the contours of [Stevens'] own mind" (Litz, IV 274).

The shift away from lyrical meditation into the theatre of reality, which marks the post-Harmonium long poems, is a movement of increasing

decentralization. Why does this seem like an odd claim to make? Recalling his personal "distaste for miscellany" and his preference for "a fixed point of view," we will remember that Stevens was sharp to criticize Williams' Al Que Quiere in 1918 (Williams, Kora 17-18). Even as late as 1948 Stevens valorized those poets who were what he named "adherents of the central" over and above those more marginal poets who were "adherents of the imagination" (NA 116). His theory of a poetry of the central, elucidated in his essay "Effects of Analogy," hinges on interpreting the imagination "as a power within him to have such insights into reality as will make it possible for him to be sufficient as a poet in the very center of consciousness"(NA 116). Yet to master the center of one's consciousness is simultaneously to press toward that "ultimate good sense we term civilization" (NA 116). Poetry becomes, for Stevens the arena in which is dramatized the self's pains to know its world and, hence, its own identity.

Despite Stevens' late articulated aesthetics--with his repeated emphasis on homogeneity, unity, and centrality--his later poetry actually toys with the play of the words on the page as they slip out from under the controlling authorial consciousness only to take on a distinct, separate existence. After his attempt to create a controlled, autobiographical context for his lyrical epic of consciousness, his later poems enter the more threatening (because of their generic openness) interdiscursive context of the long poem. Here homogeneity is splintered into a multiplicity of fragments; opposites cannot be synthesized and centralized in the mind of the poet, but remain unreconciled in a world of differences; and even generic distinctions are blurred, rendering impossible the authorization of any one voice or ground over the others.

The fissure that is literalized as a six year period of silence in Stevens' poetic life figuratively connotes the fundamental difference between the phenomenological reading evoked by the form of "The Comedian" and the post-structuralist reading required by the (non)form of the post-Harmonium long poems. If our comprehension of a particular genre's codes informs us how to read a poem, it does so because "the reading of a poem is part of the poem," as J. Hillis Miller reminds us in "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II" (333).

By marking the fissure in Stevens' canon along the lines of phenomenological and post-structuralist assumptions regarding grounds and language, I am not responding to my own subjective responses to the texts. To read ethically or deconstructively is not, J. Hillis Miller would claim, to be "mountain-minded Hoon...Who found all form and order in solitude" (CP 121). Although theory is here presented prior to the terra firma of supportive textual readings,[10] I do not wish my methodology to imply the Fishian notion that "Strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (Is There a Text 171).[11] Fish's reader is none other than Hoon himself: "I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw/Or heard or felt came not but from myself" (CP 65).[12] The theory presented here arises out of the text, the words on the page, their form and rhetorical play, not in the reader's desire to see the text as a vacancy that can be shaped as one wishes. The lacuna in Stevens' canon that I describe is not a "golden ointment" that rained "Out of my mind" (CP 65). Proof is only temporarily suspended. The enhancement of our reading of "The Comedian" is possible if we sustain a consciousness of the Other--his later protracted poems. The fissure based on difference emanates from

the texts themselves. The critics's task, not unlike the reader's, is to repeat what the text bears. One cannot, Miller emphasizes, "by any means get outside the text, escape from the blind alleys of language he finds in the work. He can only rephrase them in other allotropic terms" ("Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II" 331).

This is not to say that the interpretive act is a passive, innocent decoding of what is a given in any text: texts are not hermeneutically sealed. An issue of substantial import to bear in mind is that we "live in a place/That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves" (CP 383). Our alienation within our own homeland has large repercussions for how we read/decode the signs in reality and, by extension, poetry. The mature Stevens knew that the paradoxical nature of reality could only lead to multiple, indeterminate interpretations:

> The imperfect is our paradise
> Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
> Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
> Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds. (CP 194)

Poetry that responds to the imperfect paradise that is our reality results in "flawed words and stubborn sounds," because "Art, broadly, is the form of life...[and]...is often indistinguishable from life itself" (OP 158). The act of reading is no different: it, too, imitates reality The poems of our climate will breed imperfect readings inescapably. For the same reason that "the natives of rain are rainy men" (CP 37), the readings of an imperfect paradise will create imperfect readings.

Already "the [critical] dump is full/Of images" (CP 201) pertaining to Stevens' long poems, and the skeptic may wonder about the necessity of ceaselessly adding to it. First, we must remember that the signs in the text of a poem refuse to sit still throughout time. They, themselves, urge, cajole, and demand the

proliferation of signs that erupt from its signs. The endless dissemination of signs into further signs guarantees the life of poetry, which is my second point. Third, critical interpretation is, like poetry, made of language; consequently it, too, refuses to settle and ossify. One interpretation spawns another, but each advance made is possible because of past interpretations on which it is built. No critical swerve, no matter how daring, is a "divergence made too steep to follow down" (CP 293). As Stevens says in "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," with respect to his geneological/biological inheritance,

> This is the pit of torment that placid end
> Should be illusion, that the mobs of birth
> Avoid our stale perfections, seeking out
> Their own, waiting until we go
> To picnic in the ruins that we leave. (CP 292-93)

The interpretive act cannot be terminated, no final word can be produced, and all "perfect" readings will eventually turn stale. To believe otherwise is to be dangerously deluded.

Unless, as A. R. Ammons reminds us, we "strike and fix/a random, contradicting image" (SP 58) for the long poem or any poem, it will fall prey to its own annihilation. To allow one critical reading, no matter how strong, to become the "focused beam," an image that "glares filling all space," is to find that "the head falls and/hangs and cannot wake itself" (Ammons, SP 58). The head that Ammons describes belongs to Stevens' deluded Konstantinova, "the lunatic of one idea/In a world of ideas" (CP 325). Before him, it belonged to Keats' sleeping Saturn, whose "bow'd head" bespeaks the impotence of his voice to continue to assert its order in a new and different world (PW "Hyperion" 1-21). The "pit of torment," a figuration of a mise en abyme, is covered over, however, by seeing each particular

critical interpretation as a willed belief "in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else" (OP 163). The openendedness of the critical task does not undermine its value. Readings will perpetually undergo alterations, revisions, editions, and subversions by the critic himself, as well as other critical voices. The ruins of the past will become the picnic grounds of the present.

While modern life may be life lived in "a gutted world" (CP 159), as Stevens indicated in "A Postcard from the Volcano," the modern critic must still continue "weaving budded aureoles." Even though what critics of the past said of poems "became/A part of what it is" (CP 159), past discourse does not constitute a completed or depleted discourse, by any means. Stevens' metaphoric mansion is a house of language that resiliently survives because of its transformative powers. This mansion (perhaps an apt trope for the long poem) contains "A spirit storming in blank walls" (CP 159). Those necessarily blank walls enable us to extend critical discourse infinitely. To bring Stevens' long poems out of phenomenology and into post-structuralism, one must respond to the poems "again with an ignorant eye" (CP 380). To proceed in this fashion is not to deny those ineradicably inscribed past interpretations, nor is it impossibly aimed to terminate the certainty of future readings. To the contrary, it is hoped that the readings which follow extend the borders of criticism, if only slightly. In so doing, we guarantee both the prolonged life of the poems themselves and the criticism pertaining to the form of future long poems. We can proceed now, equipped with only one certainty: the only "constants" we have are the printed words on the page, and the knowledge that they are "inconstant objects of inconstant cause/In a universe of inconstancy" (CP 389).

II. The Center Can Hold: Eliot, Pound, Williams

Williams, Pound, and Eliot, each in his singular way, felt impelled to extend the crystalline lyric at some point in his career. After years of perfecting and experimenting with the lyric, their canons reach an acme in a lyrical epic, a modern quest form built upon the fluid possibilities of the lyric itself. The supple, pliable lyric form was the key to the modern epic, explains Paul Mariani in The Usable Past (75). As such, appreciation of the lyric, the subjective, and the organically unified grew to surpass the more ancient valorization of epic and public values. In The Spirit of Romance, Pound reads Dante's Divine Comedy in the spirit of modernism. He writes: "The Divina Commedia must not considered as an epic; to compare it to epic poems is usually unprofitable. It is in a sense lyric, the tremendous lyric of the subjective Dante" (153). Since Poe's valorization of the symbol and its association with lyric organicism (what Frye refers to in "Approaching the Lyric" as that "small room" complete in itself [Lyric Poetry 34]), poetry has been decoded as lyrical discourse. In A Glossary of Literary Terms, M. H. Abrams names the present century as that era in which "the lyric has become by far the preponderant poetic form" (100, emphasis mine). The emergence of New Criticism, with its emphasis on the symbol, organic form, and the speaker's attitude, methodologically prompted what Jonathan Culler called the "romance of unification." In the name of the harmonious whole that which is anomalous or irregular is suppressed. The modern lyrical epic was written/read no differently.

The triumvirate of lyrical epics that dominated the first half of the twentieth century--The Waste Land, The Cantos, Paterson--were so fragmented that they were read as a series of lyrics strung together, yet circling back upon and around a

central governing subject.[13] Grounded on the lyric, as understood by the modernists, the lyrical epic came to signify the culminative quest for self and cultural identity. To sing "One's-self...a simple separate person" is, as Whitman pronounced, to "utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse" (Leaves 1). Oddly enough, the democratization of the lyric in this new form actually served to enhance the long form's "small room" quality. Unity as opposed to difference reigned unchallenged despite structural fragmentation.[14] In The Embodiment of Knowledge, William Carlos Williams explains the fundamental philosophical antagonism that exists between democracy and difference: "It [democracy] hates it [difference], tears down fences that delineate, is jealous of differences ...sets a premium on placelessness" (134). Formally, the long lyrical epic is to embody difference democratically, yet ultimately to embrace it in a unifying whole. It reinforces the metaphor of that self-contained small room and makes, as Donne once said, "one little room, an every where" ("The Good Morrow" 11).

The drive to extend the lyrical "I" diachronically across history and time, without sacrificing its own unity, is the motivating force behind Eliot's, Pound's, and Williams' lyrical epics. Writing to Marianne Moore, Williams describes that moment when he experienced the "inner security" produced by his knowledge of the unity between the subjective ego and the objective world. It was, he writes,

> something which occurred when I was about twenty, a sudden resignation to existence, a despair--if you wish to call it that, but a despair that makes everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. (SL 147)

Just as Williams turns the entire world into his own mind and vice versa, Pound believed that knowledge of the outer world was impossible without knowledge of

that inner world of the self as shared by all. Assuming the constant of a human ontology, Pound claimed in the Guide to Kulchur that "No conception of culture will hold good if you omit the enduring constants in human composition" (47). To begin with the self is to find the outer world, which is to rediscover the self. "The beginning is often the end," as Eliot wrote in his famous lines from "Little Gidding," but "to make an end is to make a beginning" (CP 221). The self is incessantly returned to in the process of ongoing exploration, because "the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time" (CP 222). Even for Eliot, for whom poetry was to be an escape from emotion and personality through his mythical method and his theory of the objective correlative, his verse finally returns to the presupposed ground of the self.[15]

The emergence of the lyrical epic form (which writes the lyrical I in large, universal terms) is the result of these poets' fundamental commitment to the ground of the self. Concomitant with this commitment is the hidden belief in a human ontology and the consequent belief that exploration of the self will lead to knowledge of the outer, real world. The self is the inroad to that outer world. In a noteworthy article entitled "Grounds in Literary Study," J. Hillis Miller contends that generic distinctions, for all their seeming arbitrariness, have value and make distinct sense only if we comprehend the ground on which the particular genre is founded (34). The prior commitment to a ground--be it society, self, language, or Miller's "it"--determines the boundaries of a genre and how it will be read. The particular genre of the lyrical epic as used by Eliot, Pound, and Williams is grounded upon the self. In Millerian thinking this ground is not intrinsic to the genre but based upon a previous commitment, made consciously or unconsciously by the generating

mind of the author. The choice of a ground, Miller writes, "determines both the definition of each genre and the implicit or explicit hierarchy among them" (34). Having chosen the self as their final ground, these poets experimented with the rather oxymoronic lyrical epic genre. By implicitly priorizing the lyric I, they were able to focus on the self without falling prey to solipsism. Within this paradoxical form the closed lyrical self could be opened: the development of a self-mythology simultaneously evoked an understanding of cultural history. The two are not mutually exclusive, either in their thinking or in their chosen form.

The interconnectedness of a self-mythology and cultural history was fundamental to Eliot and Pound. Consider briefly Eliot's "Notes toward a Definition of Culture" and Pound's Guide to Kulchur. On the surface these prose pieces seem radically at odds with one another. Eliot's highly linear, sequential style bespeaks his belief that one can control and codify knowledge of the past because the past continues to be present in the present ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" SP 38). Counter to Eliot's centripetalist, systematic thinking, Pound writes of history in a centrifugalist fashion. His style is disrupted, anti-linear, and dissociative. While Eliot's predominant metaphor in "Notes" is the Pauline metaphor of the body with many parts (198), Pound's method is rather Nietzschian. Michel Foucault argues for Nietzsche (and I would say the same for Pound) that "Knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting" (Language, Counter-memory, Practice 154). Pound presents not Eliot's structured "body" of thought, but an uncodified "phalanx of particulars" (Canto 74). The particulars are critical for Pound, as emphasized by his atomistic style, but what we must not forget is that out of them we are to find not an overwhelming

incoherency, but the pattern they weave in the final fabric (GK 29). In Northrop Frye on Culture and Literature, Frye speaks of it as our duty to search for that total image which the particulars compose (201).

In spite of their differences both Eliot and Pound can only begin to talk about culture if they leave one myth intact--the myth of a human ontology. Neither one forfeits this final consolation, for regardless of the degree of cultural disintegration, the possibility for ultimate cultural cohesion resides in those "enduring constants" of human nature. Himself not exempt from human nature, the poet is a representative man. His modest offering to others will be "notes" or a "guide" through the past and, hence, to the future. The self--be it the self of the poet, speaker, or the self as universalized "we"--is a synecdoche for the larger cultural body.[16] Even though Eliot gives us the "body," "tradition," and "embracing," while Pound gives us the "part," "discontinuousness," and "smashing," both depend on a center which can hold, and that center is the self.

III. Stevens' Parodic Reply: A Turning Toward and Turning From

With the publication of The Waste Land in 1922, modern poetry learned a way to sustain the lyric moment. The task of writing a lyrical epic came to signal the pinnacle of one's poetic maturity.

The reverse was the case for Stevens, however. The appearance of "The Comedian" in his first volume, as opposed to, say, his last, serves to undc this oft repeated modernist pattern of moving out of the closed, subjective lyric into the more open and culturally-implicated lyrical epic. Stevens actually marginalizes his lyrical epic, which he first called "From the Journal of Crispin." Having "very

little time" to give the poem, he still submitted it to Harriet Monroe's Poetry magazine in the hope of winning the Blindman prize money. To his mind, the poem was "a very rancid butter" in spite of his "churning and churning" (L 224). Called upon by Pitts Sanborn the next summer to submit a long poem for Measure,[17] Stevens endeavored to make something of the "Journal" poem (L 229). The long poem that emerged, with its new title and revised and elongated text, was not published until the first edition of Harmonium (1923). Whether "The Comedian" originated out of desire for money or the desire to oblige a favor is not of consequence. The product itself, though, bears testimony to Stevens' felt necessity to wrestle with the legacy of his precursors and his will to survive.

To begin--to take his first steps into the realm of the long poem--is first to repeat. The achievement of his own poetic form was to be had only after he proved himself capable of writing a quest poem as established by his Modern and Romantic precursors. Although I do not intend to undermine the poem's rhetorical exuberance, "The Comedian" is a "retirement like a turning back/And sinking down to the indulgences/ That in the moonlight have their habitude" (CP 35). Like the vacillating Crispin, Stevens was necessarily seduced by the "backward lapses" (CP 35) into a stale romantic. While "the purpose of [Crispin/Stevens'] pilgrimage" was "to drive away/The shadow of his fellows from the skies" (CP 37), Stevens discerned his first major long poem to be ultimately overshadowed. Yet the repetition of the Romantic quest form, together with the protracted period of silence with which it was accompanied, ultimately allowed Stevens to be "from their stale intelligence released" (CP 37). The repetition of form marked Stevens' survival; the period of his silence afterward marked a lull before the storm of his ingression

into poetic license and his rapid, successive publication of a string of long poems. Therefore, just as Crispin lapses back into his moonlight fictions before moving forward to his final, hard aesthetic, so, too, does Stevens move backward into an older, established form and onto older, safer ground so as to reach his future long poems. In The Anxiety of Influence, Bloom calls this oxymoronic moment "Kenosis" or a "breathing forth into a freshening that yet repeats his precursors' achievements" (83).

Bloom's description of the ephebe-poet's experience is particularly enlightening with regard to "The Comedian " :

> ...the ephebe's first sensation, as newly incarnated poet, is that of having been thrown, outward and downward, by the same glory whose apprehension found him, and made him a poet. The ephebe's first realm is ocean, or by the side of ocean, and he knows he reached the element of water through a fall. What is instinctual in him would hold him there, but the antithetical impulse will bring him out and send him inland, questing for the fire of his own stance. Most of what we call poetry--since the Enlightenment anyway--is this questing for fire, that is, for discontinuity. Repetition belongs to the watery shore, and Error comes only to those who go beyond discontinuity, on the airy journey up into a fearful freedom of weightlessness. Prometheanism, of the quest for poetic strength, moves between the antinomies of thrown-ness (which is repetition) and extravagance (Binswagerian Verstiengenheit or poetic madness, or true Error). (Anxiety 79).

The Promethean quest for fire, in this case poetic strength, occupies Stevens in his only lyrical epic. It is most evident in the development of the narrative plot line.

The poem's narrative traces the movement of the poet-protagonist, Crispin, from his initial dependence on his Romantic poetic forefathers, to his Atlantic sea severance, and ultimately to the development of his own poetic aesthetic as he moves and settles "in the land" (CP 46) of America. Befitting Bloom's archetypal paradigm, aesthetic severance from one's precursors is ironically achieved by

Crispin/Stevens' necessary repetition of the Romantic internalized quest form. Prior to experiencing the "inscrutable world" (CP 27) of the sea, Crispin asserts with bardic certainty that "man is the intelligence of his soil" (CP 27). The bravado implicit in this romantically-drenched journal notation is, however, a borrowed optimism. It cannot be empirically grounded, Crispin discovers, in his immediate, impenetrable experience. To be truly self-begotten in his own environment, Crispin must assert himself antithetically against the tradition he inherited "in the crusty town/From which he sailed" (CP 33). The antithetical impulse in the poet does not translate into a smooth transition, however. If the sea's baptismal waters made him new (CP 30), and Yucatan made him "more than free, elate, intent, profound" (CP 33), the somnolent spring world of Carolina made him feel that "the hubbub of his pilgrimage" (CP 33) had passed. At this point the linear narrative pull wavers as Crispin feels the power of spring, that "gemmy marionette" (CP 36), seduce him back into his earlier, pejorative, moonlight fictions. When most seduced by the evasiveness of a stale romantic, Crispin clarifies his own "rude aesthetic" (CP 36) as the only sufficing aesthetic for the rank-smelling new world of America. Now the ephebe is freshly motivated in his will to discover "the essential prose" (CP 36). Realizing that his very life as a poet depends upon discarding "the whole/Shebang" of that "tumbling verse" (CP 37) of his precursors, Crispin seems to achieve liberation from the past. Therefore, the plot's principal concern is to record Crispin's recognition of his indebtedness to his precursors and their potentially debilitating power over him.

The plot's climax is that critical moment when Crispin responds to his "antithetical impulse" to be self-begotten. His move inland midway through the

poem is a (geo)graphic symbol of his inner "antithetical impulse," which is doubly enforced by the journal inscription of an equally antithetical notation. In "The Idea of a Colony," Crispin inverts and, in his eyes, corrects his earlier assumption: "his soil is man's intelligence" (CP 36). The violence and heat that were in him in southern Yucatan (CP 31) now openly spark into his quest for the fire of his own stance. Ironically, the spark is quickly extinguished. Questing for prosaic reality, Crispin finds himself progressively imprisoned by his aesthetic pilgrimage into the principle of the plain (CP 38). Crispin's climax peters out into a "haphazard denouement" (CP 40).

From this point onward, the remainder of the poem is occupied with the building and occupying of Crispin's colony-become-prison. The twice repeated reference to Crispin's dwelling "in the land" (CP 40), with the accent stressing the word "in," begins to take on the weight of literalness, as if Crispin were dead and dwelt <u>in</u> the land. The last two cantos reinforce the notion that this fatalist is enduring a death-in-life existence. Observe in these exemplary phrases tropes of imprisonment, disease or illness, and impotence: "the difficulty of rebellious thought;" "infected will;" "day by day, now this thing and now that/Confined him" (CP 40); "motionless march" (CP 42); and "Crispin trod,/Each day, still curious, but in a round" (CP 42). Examples of Crispin's sapped and static state upon his return to social nature are multiple. It finally appears that the only way out of this centripetalist spiralling that goes nowhere is to "clip" it.

Whichever way one looks at it now, Crispin is cornered. Knowing and naming himself a fatalist, he has thus fixed his perception of reality into the singular image of a turnip. Having lost the desire to "stem verboseness" (CP 28),

Crispin accepts his turnip world as an "insoluble lump" (CP 45). Whether we read the ending positively ("benignly" [CP 46]) or negatively is, perhaps, irrelevant. The word "clipped" itself reinforces both interpretations. In modern usage it means to cut short, to strike, to cheat, or to cut, but it also carries its archaic and antithetical meaning of embracing or clasping together. What is is what is, so perhaps the best anyone can do is, like Crispin, to "[step] in and [drop] the chuckling down his craw./ Without grace or grumble" (CP 45).

With respect to its plot, the poem is caught between the repetition that belongs to the realm of water and the desire for that necessary discontinuity, the fire which marks one's own stance. "The Comedian" is caught in the moment between these antinomies. The poem also generically repeats the same problematic: the repetition of the traditional quest poem and the discontinuity of Modern parodic practice. As readers decoding this text, we can best recognize generic textual discontinuity if we first recognize that which the text aims to repeat. As numerous other critics have claimed, "The Comedian" falls within the genre of the autobiographical Romantic quest poem. Our hero is, significantly, a poet, although a minor one, who writes only a "couplet yearly to the spring" (CP 31). He has as well a quest or "simple jaunt" to make: "Bordeaux to Yucatan, Havana next,/And then to Carolina" (CP 29). The deflationary adjective "simple" is ironic when we realize the allegorical implications of this trip, which will chart the transformations of the romantic poet who dissociates himself from old, "crusty" (CP 33) Europe for new, elemental America. He comes to America as a Stevensian modern-day priest--a "poetic hero without palms/Or jugglery, without regalia" (CP 35). His task is "to catechize" (CP 31) in verse the reality of the place in which he finds himself, now

that he has "come out of luminous traversing" (CP 30). Having been "made vivid by the sea" (CP 30) and its purgative waters, Crispin begins his land journey northward. The poem traces his internal vicissitudes closely: his desire for "aggrandizement" (CP 31), his will to scrawl "an aesthetic tough, diverse, untamed..." (CP 31), his revelations at sea and before the cabildo of the Yucatan cathedral, his temptation to slip back into the moonlight fictions which "Grind their seductions on him" (CP 35), and his resignation, "little by little" (CP 40), to the indifferent existence of the quotidian. Lastly, in keeping with the quest form, the poem progresses teleologically, only to circle back upon itself and to end almost where it began. Tired of "gelatines and jupes," "simple salad-beds," and "honest quilts" (CP 27), which represent old and stagnant Europe, the "aspiring clown" (CP 39) seeks mysterious seabound porpoises instead of landlocked apricots (CP 27). No longer "content with counterfeit" (CP 39), the leaner Crispin resolves that he must confront the crude text of American reality (CP 39). Whatever "progress" he makes as his quest develops is questionable. By poem's and journey's end, Crispin has indeed changed from a vital "introspective voyager" (CP 29) to a moribund "effective colonizer sharply stopped/In the door-yard by his own capacious bloom" (CP 44). He who began "despising honest quilts" still "Lies quilted to his poll in his despite" (CP 41). For what reason then has Crispin suffered being "plucked,/Sacked up and carried overseas," then "daubed out," "pruned to the fertile main/And sown again" (CP 45)? What does Crispin learn from his quest, except that he is capable only of "proving what he proves/Is nothing" (CP 46)?

This work clearly repeats the fundamental elements of what M. H. Abrams called, in Natural Supernaturalism, the "crisis autobiography" of the Romantic period

(123). The Romantic transcontextualization of Christian supernaturalism into the natural world led to the elevation of the mind of the worldly creator--the poet. The plot form, which became ensconced into a genre particular to the Romantics, is synthesized by a biological metaphor. The "model" for poems of this nature, Abrams writes, is that "of biological genesis, growth, and development" (191). In an attempt to justify evil and suffering in the world, the Romantics developed poems which traced "a circuitous yet progressive self-education, self-discovery, and the discovery of vocation, in a life which terminates in this world" (123). The quest for self-knowledge, the acceptance of pain as a means to growth, the circular journey, the gradual clarification of oneself as a poet, and the resistance to transcending the this-worldly because there is no other-worldly--these constitute the basic codes which we must correctly identify with the autobiographical epic of the Romantics if we wish to read "The Comedian" with a more complete comprehension.

What Abrams' Natural Supernaturalism teaches us is that, whether a Wordsworth or a Whitman, the pattern had been established and the elements codified. So much so is this the case that he calls Keats' Induction to "The Fall of Hyperion" a "Prelude in miniature," and for good reason. As Abrams systematically outlines the principal generic codes, think in terms of Crispin/Stevens in "The Comedian":

> the growth of the poet's mind turns on a crisis in which he achieves and recognizes his poetic identity and mission; incorporates the justification of pain as indispensable to his coming of age both as a man and as a poet of suffering humanity; involves the clarification to him of his own poetics and of the great poet's high office as sage, humanist, and physician to all men; and issues in the genesis of the epic poem that the

> poet envisions and goes on, at the end, to narrate. (128-29)

"The Comedian," whose narrative sequence mimics these same codes, becomes a foregrounded text whose significance depends upon its relationship with the implicitly backgrounded texts. The backgrounded texts consist of a string of Romantic quest works against which the new work is to be gauged. Individually, these texts are the products of heterogeneous voices--Wordsworth, Shelley, Whitman, Pound--but they form a single, generically unified background text against which "The Comedian" juxtaposes itself.

Stevens' first long poem was not created ex nihilo. The identifiable and generically rigidified codes in which it openly participates break down textual boundary lines. A labyrinth of British and American precursor texts lie within and behind this new variation on its form. Analogous to the very form which constitutes it, "The Comedian" circles the reader back a full century to Wordsworth, Rousseau, Shelley, Keats, Emerson, and Whitman.

Given the high seriousness of the backgrounded texts, on what basis can we compare the enormous lyrical "I"'s that wander through The Prelude, Confessions, "Alastor," the Hyperion poems, and Leaves of Grass with Crispin? How can the "pipping sounds" (CP 29) of this "lutanist of fleas" (CP 28) be regarded in the context of Whitman's "prophetical screams" (Leaves 44), the passion that comes upon the Alastor poet "Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream" (PW 225), or the prophetic "renovated spirit" of Wordsworth "singled out...for holy services" (The Prelude 53-54)? The text quickly signals to the reader that the traditional codes are treated in a deflationary, bathetic manner. The act of reading "The Comedian" must, therefore, be carried on with a double consciousness: a consciousness of

particularly difficult poetry like Olson's, has the "potential of breaking down the reader's resistance to its intractabilities" (180). The long poem became for Stevens that form adequate to the enormity of his will and mind, for only in the freedom of its expansiveness could ideas, the reader, and form itself be decreated back to "the first idea" (CP 381) and seen anew as if for the first time. In short, because "everything is of a piece" (NA 48), Stevens can only conclude that "a certain order of forms corresponds to a certain order of minds" (NA 48).

Criticism since Stevens' death in 1955 and throughout the 1960's, by and large, followed suit. Critical text after critical text proceeded to ground its reading of Stevens on his aesthetic claims, made available for the first time in 1951, with the publication of The Necessary Angel. What came to birth was a whole school of criticism that Frank Lentricchia has aptly referred to as "the Phenomenologists" throughout all of After the New Criticism. One of the fundamental assumptions unifying this diverse group of scholars is that language is inherently meaningful and, by extension, that the written poem is a means through which the author voices and communicates his feelings and emotions to an audience capable of understanding the significance of such claims for himself and all men. The poet is, as Wordsworth claimed, "a man of speaking to men."

Roy Harvey Pearce was one of the first critics to bring Stevens into the phenomenological mode in The Continuity of American Poetry. In 1961, he claimed that poetry is "derived from the poet's concern to declare that language, in spite of all that we may do to it, is inherently meaningful--no matter what the ultimate source of meaning --because poems made out of it can manifest its capacity to mean" (431). But Pearce did make clear what the ultimate source of

Stevens' conscious repetition of an established quest pattern and a consciousness of his conscious deviation from these norms. The backgrounded texts are always already superimposed on the foregrounded text, but the traditional codes are not merely repeated. The thundering voices of Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley cannot be conveyed across the Atlantic without suffering a sea-change. "The Comedian" is obviously more than a mere repetition, for neither Crispin nor Stevens drowns in the realm of ocean (which Bloom named as the ephebe poet's first realm).

Stevens' poem incorporates difference or discontinuity into its very act of repetition. He knew that the trick to Renato Poggioli's task of translating the work would be "to try to reproduce the every-day plainness of the central figure and the plush, so to speak, of his stage" (L 778). As an anti-hero on an anti-quest in an "anti-mythological poem" (L 778), Crispin is yet ironically juxtaposed against a plush stage composed of the devices that constitute the great autobiographical mind-poems of the previous century. In 1922, Stevens was still reticent to relinquish the plush stage of his precursor poets. The time had not yet come for his announcement of a necessary "new stage" (CP 240) or its construction, as witnessed in the utter bareness of parts II-IV of "The Auroras of Autumn."

This difference sparks many of the poem's tensions: old Europe/new America, narrator's high, pedantic language/the commonplace language of the everyday world, poet as Shelleyian legislator of the world/poet as ordinary man living a stifling bourgeois existence, and so forth. The constant building and tripping up of the romantic images of the poet creates a comic Chaplinesque scenario throughout the poem. At the same time that the poem achieves a stance of authority and dignity, it undermines that stance with an inverse and subversive

stance of self-irony and self-criticism.

What still counts, however, is that great "mythology of self" (CP 28). Steven's "reproduction" of that self is, due to its sea-voyage, a necessarily "Blotched out" copy (CP 28). The "spoiling" of the perfected Romantic form is essential if the belated modernist wishes to guarantee his continued quest for poetic strength or fire. Stevens' first long poem marks the beginning of his Promethian quest for poetic strength, despite the fact that it led him headfirst into six years of poetic impotence. It signals a turning point in his quest for fire that eventually led him away from "the immense dew of Florida" where "lightening colors../in me, come flinging/Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames" (CP 95) toward the more somber Oxidia, "the soot of fire" because "Oxidia is Olympia" (CP 182).

The act of recontextualizing the questing poet out of the old country and into the new enables Stevens to defamiliarize the generic norms established by the Romantics' over-usage. In short, the parodic mode makes it possible for him to wrestle with his precursors and "their stale intelligence" while, at the same time, incorporating textual discontinuities so as to make "a new intelligence prevail" (CP 37). Remember, for instance, Stevens' words in "Recitation After Dinner," and note his conscious use of the familial metaphor:

> It has a clear, a single, a solid form,
> That of the son who bears upon his back
> The father that he loves, and bears him from
> The ruins of the past, out of nothing left,
> .....
> .....The son restores
> The father. He hides his ancient blue beneath
>
> His own bright red. But he bears him out of love.
>
> (OP 87)

The method of defamiliarization--the hiding of blue beneath red--is best described as Janus-faced. It automatically assumes knowledge of the familiar, or that which is being transgressed upon, as it transforms it. As a "shrewd [novitiate]" like Stevens is aware even "bland excursions into time to come" (a modern parodic work) are necessarily "related in romance to backward flights" (CP 39) (the traditional work being parodied). Like Crispin's own prolegomena, "The Comedian" is an inscription of "Commingled souvenirs and prophecies" (CP 37). It prolongs the discourse of the "monotonous babbling" (CP 39) of past voices, in the very same breath that it seeks to hide or erase it.

Stevens' choice of the parodic mode for his first long poem is particularly interesting because as a mode it appeases two conflicting impulses--the impulse to be named as the son of the great father and the impulse to be self-begotten. Stevens' desire to be poetically aligned into the great genealogical tradition of his forefathers leaves him wishing to be recognized as, at the very least, a "fagot in a lunar fire" (CP 33). His veneration of this glorious literary history is captured in his trope of a "lunar fire." It is also reinforced by his calling himself a "fagot," which is a typically modernist response of humility due to his inescapable belatedness. What appears at first glance to be a comic and deflationary image of a modern ephebe poet, however, is actually a repetition of Shelley's sublime image of the One Poem. For Shelley, all poems are "fragments" which will one day be recognized as "episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world" ("Defence," CW 124). Although he may only be a mere fagot among many (so to speak), Stevens senses the importance of each contribution, however slight, to the

poetic tradition. He says as much in "The Sail of Ulysses": "Each man/Is an approach to the vigilance/In which the litter of truths becomes/A whole" (OP 102).

Parody also satisfies Stevens' antithetical impulse to believe that he is self-begotten. As a poet, Stevens' aim is to become "the intelligence of his soil," that "potent figure" who "creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it" (NA 31) and gives to life those supreme fictions which "help us to live our lives" (NA 36). To do so, he must remember those who have already literally and figuratively inhabited that soil. At the same time, he must willfully forget or actively "expunge" their dreams which lie insidiously "buried in our sleep" (CP 39) or unconscious. "If he [dreams] their dreams," which Stevens does here by repeating the Romantic quest mode, then he must at least repeat the pattern "in a gingerly way" (CP 39)--or with a parodic twist. The modern poet's survival depends upon his stubborn, willed belief in his own newness, a myth that treats self-generation as possible. Parody, with its ability to defamiliarize the long entrenched codes of the precursors, enables the poet to retrace already broken ground as if for the first time. Stevens' own words could be used to define parody as "both of remembering/And of forgetfulness, in alternate strain" (CP 29).

It is not uncommon for an ephebe poet to begin his experiments in a new form in the parodic mode. In A Theory of Parody, Linda Hutcheon states that

> the structural parodic act of incorporation and synthesis (whose strategy or function for the reader...is paradoxically one of the ironic contrast or separation) might be seen as the means for some writers to shake off stylistic influences, to master and so supercede an influential predecessor...This phenomenon suggests a need on the part of the artist to come to terms at some point in his or her career--even if only through irony--with formal literary conventions and with the past. Parody could be seen, then,

> as an act of emancipation: irony and parody can act to signal distance and control in the encoding act. (96)

Hutcheon's treatment of parody, which is clearly indebted to M. M. Bakhtin's reading of parody in the Middle Ages and his notion of the carnival in The Dialogical Imagination (70-79), is particularly interesting with respect to "The Comedian" as a parody of the "crisis autobiographical" form. As an "overtly hybrid and double-voiced" method (Hutcheon, 28)[18] parody arises out of an "ambivalence," which "stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression" (23). These self-contradictory impulses--reverence towards the past and a will to overturn it--can never be resolved into any hierarchy. It appears then that "The Comedian" demands being read as a self-reflexive commentary on its own parodic nature. Torn between two self-contesting impulses, Stevens writes a text which enacts his own personal dilemma. The poem, like the form itself, cannot achieve synthesis but will always be a "voyaging" "up and down between two elements" (CP 35). The bottom line of this poet's journey and its parodic treatment is Crispin/Stevens' conscious will to surpass his precursor poets and, simultaneously, his bathetic vision of his own desire as ludicrous.

The test of Crispin/Stevens' quest is his ability or strength to elevate his own poetic powers. His success depends upon his equal power to undercut by ironic inversion the poetic strength of his most threatening "Others"--the voices from the past. He must assert his presence so as to emphasize their absence. The ephebe poet is, therefore, described as an "insatiable egotist" (CP 30): it is his voracious nature to consume every potential "Other" or competing voice in the poem. Yet

what the parodic form does is to show us that the ephebe's task will inevitably fail: traces of these "Other" voices or consciousnesses will always exist in the parodic mode necessarily. Crispin/Stevens can, at best, only partly efface them. He can achieve some power over his precursors insofar as he can freely appropriate for his own purposes their discourse, which is canonized in the hardened genre of the lyrical epic as an internalized quest. But his language will always betray his indebtedness to an earlier era. Stevens' silly alliterations ("Socrates of snails"), hyperboles ("Could Crispin stem verboseness in the sea"), comic caricatures ("lutanist of fleas"), and abrupt deflations ("simple jaunt") inform us immediately of his intent to parody formally, semantically, and linguistically the high seriousness of the Romantic quest form and its heroic language.

The fact that Stevens withdrew from any poetic writing/publishing for six years after this parodic work leads one to wonder if the writing of parody is a sign of one's overcoming the past through mastery or of one's undoing under the weight of the inescapability of the past. For Linda Hutcheon, parody is a curative means for the poet to deal with his past. To achieve his poetic license, the poet must not interpret the past negatively as a burden, but positively as a textbook from which to study and learn. Rewriting the past, the poet can revivify what has become faded in time. This act of repetition enables the poet to emancipate the present moment (97). Parody provides a way, ultimately, "to preserve continuity in discontinuity" (97).

If we invert Hucheon's view of how parody treats the past, we arrive at Harold Bloom's reading. The same past is, for Bloom, dark and menacing. His theory of the "anxiety of influence" makes the past so intensely alive with the

undying voices of dead poets that these same voices haunt and cripple those who succeed them temporally. He reads the past as both inescapable and burdensome, even when treated parodically. Parodying past conventions is not healthy play, in Bloom's scheme. It involves, rather, the exhaustive psychological acts of suppression and repression. Poets must at all costs "[transform] their blindness towards their precursors into the revisionary insights of their own work" (Anxiety 10; PC 72). Poetic influence is not a mark of health, but of the "disease of self-consciousness" (29). The shadow of consciousness fell after the Age of Enlightenment (27) and since then all language is undeniably tied to that "wrought" by one's precursor's (25). As a result, all "modern" works are "swerves," "misapprehensions," "self-saving caricatures," and perverse distortions of earlier works. For Bloom, all "modern" works are, necessarily, parodic.[19]

Whether as a parody "The Comedian" is a healthy exercise in the ephebe's study of the past or a sign of his sick inability to free his consciousness of that past, it is impossible for us to decide.[20] Like the form itself, the reason for a poet's writing parody is equally undecidable. On the one hand, this particular poem halted Stevens in his tracks for six years; on the other hand, it freed him from this moribund form for the remainder of his poetic career. The irony of the parodic mode is, to twist Crispin's words, that in it "severance [is not so] clear" (CP 30).

The reason why Stevens began his experiments in the long form with a parody is unanswerable and, finally, irrelevant. The more important question is, what is the ground of the genre, and does the parody threaten that ground? What kind of reading does the poem demand? As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the history of the autobiographical quest poem reveals that it rests upon a fundamental

commitment to the ground of the self and its evolving consciousness. By repeating the form of the lyrical epic, Stevens consciously chooses to walk the same ground as his ancestors. The effect of defamiliarization, produced by the applied parodic mode, can only partly cover over his tracks. As clever and humorous as Stevens' ironic inversions of the traditional conventions are, the form of the poem itself enables us to identify its ground: the self or consciousness, the author or producer of the text, the persona or speaker, whose quest for self-knowledge remains of vital importance. The parodic overlay does not threaten the centrality of the self which lies at the base. No less than the hero of "Alastor," who "[imaged] to himself the Being whom he loves," and sought "in vain for a prototype of his conception" until "Blasted by his disappointment he [descended] to an untimely grave" (Shelley, PW 14-15),Crispin/ Stevens' (sometimes questionable) acquisition of knowledge is still the keynote of the poem.

The position of centrality sustained by the pivotal self is not disturbed, even though the poem parodically diminishes the self. "The Comedian"'s refusal to abandon the traditional ground is its conservative impulse, while its comic deflation of our poet-hero is its revolutionary impulse. As Hutcheon states, "in imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces" (Theory of Parody 26). The encoded intent in the "Comedian" poem is to trace, and hence reinforce through repetition, the internal journey of Crispin's thoughts regarding his developing aesthetic, insofar as he is a synecdoche for Stevens. The life of the self, the lyrical "I", is spared in this poem even though it is pared down from the large Romantic version to a "starker, barer self" (CP 29). Stevens chooses the lyrical epic form because he, like Eliot and Pound and Whitman, still refuses to forfeit his

commitment to the ground of the self.

His choice to parody the form is not a choice to destroy its ground. Unprepared to face the nothingness with which destruction would leave him, Stevens opts for what Simone Weil called "decreation" (NA 174-75). The centrality of the large Romantic Self did not have to be annihilated, but decreated or brought back to an uncreated state with its harbored capacity for recreation. In the "starker, barer world" (CP 39) that is America, Stevens sensed that the large Romantic Self would be as out of place as Triton. Adamant that self and place share the same "idiom" (CP 419), Stevens is bound to present only the "merest miniscule" of a self. Crispin may not be a large, robust Dane in Denmark but, like the Danes, his bare self is a perfect mirror of his bare place (CP 419).[21]

"The Comedian" is Stevens' attempt to write a "great poem of the earth" (NA 142). Writing as he did on the framework of the great quests of the past, he had always to keep the words of Keats' Moneta, in the "Fall of Hyperion," in his ears: "Thou art a dreaming thing/A fever of thyself--think of the Earth" (PW I, 168-69). Stevens' earth-bound, humanist project, as inherited from the Romantics, never altered. As he wrote of the self, he had consciously to debar it from any aspirations to Romantic transcendence. For Stevens this act of leashing man to the earth was actually a means of liberating him from the ancient fiction of the gods' superiority.

In "an age of disbelief," he writes, "it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and in his style" (OP 206). We are not to assume though that the poet's role is to take the place of the gods (OP 206). Ever since the "day" when the gods "simply...came to nothing" (OP 206), the poet's task

has been to quest for "the increasingly human self" (OP 207). It is this quest that brings Stevens away from the Greek Triton of the sea and even away from those huge Romantic prophet-bards who were forever walking along some "ruddy shore" (CP 150), like the early Whitman or the later Ammons. Bound "by the earth and by men in their earthly implications" (OP 229), the true modern poet can only write about Crispin, "an everyday man who lives a life without the slightest adventure except that he lives it in a poetic atmosphere as we all do" (L 778).

In "Two or Three Ideas," Stevens explains why. He writes that

> When the time came for them [the gods] to go, it was a time when their aesthetic had become invalid in the presence not of a greater aesthetic of the same kind, but of a different aesthetic, of which from the point of view of greatness, the difference was that of an intenser humanity (OP 212-13, emphasis mine).

In 1921-22, Crispin was Stevens' first major representation of "the normal, the central" (L 352). He was to bring Stevens out of a solipsistic "world of [his] own" and enable him "to share the common life" (L 352) of man-in-general. Ironically, while Crispin is supposed to help Stevens get out of his solipsistic existence for the normal life, Stevens involves himself as poet as the exclusive subject of this poem to a greater extent than he ever did again.[22]

This "intenser humanity" in an age when "air is air," a "vacancy" uninhabited by "angel sounds" (CP 137), Stevens was able to achieve through a parody of the established traditional quest. Using for his title an apt trope for the modern age, Stevens names in "Evening Without Angels" such a quest an "antiquest" (CP 137). Stevens' great poem of earth will necessarily be a parodied and humanized quest epic. And, yet, while parodies and antiquests may result in inversions and diminutions, they do not topple Stevens' willed belief that the mind of man with his

creative consciousness or vital imagination is all one has to hold onto in a skeptical age.

Stevens' anxiousness to explore the mind of man, troped upon in "The Comedian" as a "still new continent in which to dwell" (CP 37), led Roy Harvey Pearce to place Stevens at the end of a long line of Adamic poets. For the belated Adam of the twentieth century, survival means existing without the solace of any transcendental rationale. Phoebus' death was the death of all the gods, a claim which had enormous implications for the poet. Devoid of the transcendental guarantee, he had only his own ego/mind to guide him. In Pearce's reading, this dilemma translates into an aesthetic problem: the poet has now "to make do without the authorization of form and motivations to be got from myths or gods" (Continuity of American Poetry 377). Transcendentalism neatly inverts into its more diminutive form of egocentrism.

If egocentrism is all that remains for the modern poet, then is not the form of the Romantic quest poem, a form particularly amenable to the elevation of the ego, the most authorized form available to him? Because it depends upon allowing the ego to be its sovereign ruler and guide, it appears that Stevens chose this very form for his first long poem because he insisted that some form of egocentrism replace the forms left vacant by the gods who just "disappeared" one day. Even by parodying his precursors he is, however, still willing to grant authority to the form, at least with respect to its ground of the self. His parody jests with generic conventions, but it does not dismantle the centrality of the self which is the determined ground and central authority for this genre. Without the gods' presence man may look rather clownish, but he is at least "an aspiring clown" (CP 39), like

Crispin.

For a severe spirit like Stevens, and Stevens is severe despite his dandyish frolicking, the risk of grounding his first long poem on the self as the poet and his consciousness is enormous. If the self flounders or fails, all is lost. While parody makes the project look like light entertainment, it effectively disguises the seriousness of what is at stake for Stevens as a poet. What he needed in "The Comedian," and for Harmonium as a whole, was exactly what he felt Williams' Al Que Quiere lacked: "a fixed point of view." Only the creation of a fixed subject, a central self, would save the poem and the text which contextualized it from becoming a distasteful "miscellany." He needed a controlled, monologic context in which the single, pure voice of the self could sound.[23] The questing figure capable of creating the necessary homogeneity had to be heroic enough to drive the poem onward to its end, expansive enough to embrace the anomalous and incongruous, and human enough to be recognizable by all. The desire for a center and source of meaning was a pivotal and recurring concern of Stevens'. In "The Noble Rider and The Sound of Words," Stevens bemoans the chaos of the modern age and wonders if the romantic route is not the only way to give life meaning:

> The spirit of negation has been so active, so confident and so intolerant that the commonplaces about the romantic provoke us to wonder if our salvation if the way out, is not the romantic. All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence. This is accompanied by an absence of any authority except force, operative or immanent. What has been called the disparagement of reason is an instance of the absence of authority. (NA 17)

Plagued in 1942 with a heightened consciousness of a world at war, it is little wonder that some twenty years earlier he sought "salvation" through the romantic.

In "The Comedian," Stevens experiences "war" at a more personal level: between his precursors' power to dwarf him and his stubborn will to achieve self-identity as a powerful poet. Crispin is the synecdochal "cypher" (L 351) for the authorial self. Behind this absent signifier, we are to find the signified, the originary presence whose voice exists prior to the writing--the authorized center of Stevens, himself. "It is often said of a man," Stevens writes, "that his work is autobiographical in spite of every subterfuge. It cannot be otherwise" (NA 121). Of his long poems, "The Comedian," more than any of the others, directly places the poet's personality in the "very center of consciousness" (NA 115).

As a man obsessed with finding le mot juste, it is most interesting that Stevens calls Crispin a "cypher." A cypher is a symbol of an absence of quantity or the figure 0 (zero). Still, Crispin is most simply figured forth in the letter "C", an unclosed circle or incomplete zero. He is not, it seems, a figure of absolute absence or a person of absolutely no value or importance, which is a second meaning of the word "cypher." Third, this word means a system of secret writing by prearranged scheme or key; therefore, writing in cypher or key, one can conceal a secret subtext or hidden meaning. The key of C, with all of its derivatives, is the prearranged key that Stevens chose for his "secret writing." "You have read the poem," Stevens writes to Hi Simons, "and hear all this whistling and mocking and stressing and, in a minor way, orchestrating, going on in the background" (L 352). The mocking and comical surface effect of the key of C was so critical to the poem that Stevens encouraged Simons to think of its title as "The Comedian as the Sounds of the Letter C" (L 351). His constant and deliberately tangled sound patterns in this key--"Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed"--lead us to a fourth

meaning of the word "cypher": to sound continuously, as a pipe organ.[24] Responsible for "prearranging" the scheme or key of C himself, Stevens lies behind this figure of near absence. He is the originary presence that we are taught by the poem's form to seek. In his Adagia, Stevens claims:

> The poet seems to confer his identity on the reader. It is easiest to recognize this when listening to music--I mean this sort of thing: the transference. (OP 158)

Interpretation of the "cypher," written in the musical key of C, means to trace the line of transference from Crispin back to Stevens as poet.[25]

Therefore, although the conventions are significantly scaled down in this poem, the work still remains grounded upon the Romance autobiographical quest model by Stevens, the producer of the work. Given the nature of the form there is not to be "a corresponding reduction in the amount of seriousness ascribed to Crispin's search," as Paul Bové argues in his book Deconstructive Poetics (199). Inscribed within the form is its own ground: a ground to which Stevens, as the producer of the text, was consciously or unconsciously previously committed; and a ground which the reader, as the decoder of the text, acknowledges on the basis of his or her conscious recognition of those codes that constitute the generic make-up of a work. Within the quest poem the self remains the centered, privileged point of reference even if it is only a sliver (cypher) of its former nineteenth-century self.

Due to the form of the poem and its declared intentions, our reading of "The Comedian" will necessarily "repeat" its narrative movement. We will trace sequentially the changes of geography (sea to land), climate (lush south to barer north), profession (valet to colonizer), as well as the resultant and more important changes in Crispin's philosophy (romantic idealist to realist/fatalist), epistemology

(man's intelligence governs reality to reality remains impenetrable to man's intelligence), and aesthetics (Romantic in the perjorative sense to Realist). The fact that our "hero without heroics" (OP 84) ultimately becomes "[sapped]" of his will, if not his "intent," "to track the knaves of thought" (CP 42) does not mean that, as the reader, we can desist from tracking "the [subject] of thought" --Crispin's evolving, revolving, and even devolving consciousness. This very fixed and steadfast genre is fundamentally logocentric and needs to be read phenomenologically. It bears within itself its own self-imposed hierarchy: inside over outside, subject over object, lyric over epic, speech over writing, self over other, monologic over dialogic.

Failure to acknowledge fully the inscription of the ground in the poem's form leads to Paul Bové's interpretation of "The Comedian" as an early deconstructive work. In Destructive Poetics, Bové reasons that, due to the poem's refusal to allow any synthesis to form between its contrary states, the quest motif on which the poem is built is destroyed. From this position he concludes that the poem has no center or authorized point of reference (206-208). "The Comedian" is, for Bové, a rewriting of "The Snow Man" because the long poem reiterates that, yet again, there is a nothingness at the center. Because Bové reads Crispin as an absolute figuration of zero, he belittles Crispin's significance as a cypher or secret writing beneath which lies a hidden meaning. If all Crispin can prove is that "what he proves/Is nothing" (CP 46), then for Bové his quest has been for nought.

Bloom's more equivocal response to the poem is more precise. He claims that "The Comedian" "almost undoes the tradition of the High Romantic quest-poem" (PC 70).[26] This less radical argument "corrects" Bové by paying attention to

Stevens' parodic treatment of the traditional generic codes. What this parody succeeds in doing is to show how "The father keeps on living in the son" (OP 87), despite all attempts to break free through ironic inversions of the father's beliefs and manners. Pure severance is an impossibility.

The poem, as a result, swings always in two directions: past/present, great/mediocre, prophet-bard/valet-poet, high diction/common language, man as the intelligence of his soil/the soil as the intelligence of man, and so on. This swinging or movement "up and down between two elements" (CP 35) is the necessary "fluctuating between a conservative pull to the "ancient blue" of his ancestors and a reactionary pull to express "His own bright red" (OP 87). I differ from Bové by focussing on the ground of the quest genre. We cannot read against the poem but can only repeat what it bears within itself (J. Miller, "Rock and Criticism as Cure,II" 331). The form of the poem is a consciously overly controlled, clos·i ironic form and is grounded on a vacillating ironic consciousness. Unlike Bové, whose argument is more descriptive of the alterity of Stevens' later long poems, I do not read "The Comedian" as being engaged in the open, hermeneutic subversion of past forms. The parodic treatment of Crispin and his quest still aligns the poem with "that ever-early candor" (the monologic, lyrical "I") and not "its late plural" (narrative voices), which became the project of the works that follow.

To claim the singularity of "The Comedian" on the basis of its formally encoded ground on the self is to deviate from a host of critical predecessors. Marjorie Perloff's summary, in The Dance of the Intellect, of the critical assessments of Stevens' poems demonstrates how critic after critic reiterates that, at base, Stevens' poems are lyrical explorations and affirmations of the strong Self (to

use arbitrarily Emersonian-Bloomian terminology). Her restatement of critic's restatements of Stevens' statements (the closed, centripetal spiralling of this phrase is important) is particularly illuminative of "The Comedian," but not so easily applicable to the later long poems. "In keeping with the Romantic model"--and Perloff sees all of Stevens' poems as doing exactly that--

> the "I" of Stevens is a Solitary Singer; his voice, even at its most whimsical or ironic, is never less than serious about the truths for which it searches; the tone is meditative and subdued; the addressee is always the poet himself. For Stevens, "Poetry and materia poetica are interchangeable terms," and so the emphasis, both of the poet and his critics, is on the creation of the Supreme Fiction, the poet's evolving consciousness as it comes to terms with what Bloom calls the "three crossings" central to the Romantic "crisis poem" (21)

With great precision, Perloff accurately describes the critical history of Stevens studies. What does her summation teach us, however? Does it imbue us with an understanding of what Stevens' canon is, finally, about? Or does it only bear testimony to the popularity of phenomenological criticism, which dominated academic writing in America in the nineteen sixties?[27] While Stevens' other long poems are problematical due to their generic indeterminacy, the fixed nature of the internalized quest mind/poem makes it particularly susceptible to a phenomenological reading.

The Romantic form, which is here canonically "reproduced in purple" (CP 45), demands the inscription and grounding of the self at the center of the writing. The reader of such a phenomenological genre is to efface himself before the central "working brain," to use a Keatsian trope. The form depends upon the willing subservience and transparency of the reader, who must choose to follow along although always a step or two behind. It is his or her role to "track" the transformations of consciousness that lie at the heart of the poem and are its reason

for being. His or her reading voyage of the long poem must begin, as does Crispin's journey, with an annulment of self. The reader's self-effacement in a phenomenological genre is not, however, aligned with the vigor of the masculine questor (Crispin as valet, explorer, pioneer, settler), but with the passive openness of the feminine.

Georges Poulet's essay "Phenomenology of Reading" is saturated with sexual innuendos, which align the privileged central consciousness with the male and the reader with the passive, ever-receptive female. This hierarchical gap or split is crucial to his theory of reading phenomenologically. In order to grasp the "transcendence of mind" (68) controlling a work, the Pouletian reader is to open himself or herself fully; in short, he or she is to allow the mind to play whore to the thoughts of this consciousness (56). Here are a few examples: "the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself..." (54), "the shelter which I provide" (55), "no escaping this takeover" of the reader (55), "placing my consciousness at its disposal" (59). While the reader follows along, "the consciousness inherent in the work is active and potent; it occupies the foreground" (59). The reader's role is "a much more humble role, content to record passively all that is going on in me" (59). A phenomenological reading, like the form of the quest poem, reinforces all the old safeguards of the metaphysical traditions of the patriarchal Western world: author/reader, inside/outside, foreground/background, male/female, potency (also Stevens' word for the vital poet)[28]/passivity, with the obvious privileging of the first term of each duality.

The conservative nature of Stevens' narrative structure similarly encourages a passive, "feminine" reader. Such a reader is most unlike that required by A. R.

Ammons's arbitrarily structured long poem, Tape for the Turn of the Year. In this poem, Ammons verbally scorns a passive reader and cries out for a resisting "other":

> you cushion &
> absorb my thrust!
> be a wall, for my sake!
> resist
> so I can plunge you
> down:
> This soft way
> unmans me: (193)[45]

Yet while Ammons's structure posits an epistemology of provisionalism, openendedness, and inconclusiveness, Stevens' one-time venture with a strict narrative posits a clear beginning, middle, and end. Crispin sets out by sea, undergoes a shift in his aesthetics, and finally declines into a static bourgeois existence. The end or the télos of the consciousness's development (in Romantic terminology the "going home") is still the privileged moment in such narratives. The reader, like his nameless narrator, is required to follow along, not to resist. As the poem moves toward its télos, the reader is free to interpret the "anecdote" positively or negatively, but whether he accepts the journey with "grace or grumble" (CP 45) is beside the point. The "relation of each man"--poet or reader, quester and narrator--is "clipped": their journey together is cut off when the poem concludes with its last line. While the journey lasts, however, they are also "clipped" in the archaic sense of the word, meaning to clasp or embrace. In "The Comedian," the poet (male) and reader (female) are repetitions of one another, yet with a saving difference.

While both the generic and narrative dimensions of the poem underscore Stevens' willed belief in an onto-theologic notion of the self, his shift in titles as he

revised the poem could lead to some confusion. The first title, "From the Journal of Crispin," indicates the poem's intent to convey the vicissitudes of consciousness undergone by the persona, as such internal states would be recorded in a diary or travelogue. The revised title might seem to create a different emphasis. By omitting the personal name Crispin for the more categorical term "comedian" and paring the diary-journal concept down to the mere letter "c," Stevens appears to be shifting the ground away from the consciousness of the self to the stand-up comedian's play of language. Thinking in Millerian terms, one might be tempted to interpret Stevens as positing the self as a "linguistic construction" that exists in a referential void or abyss of recessive meanings, as opposed to a "solid point de départ."

Yet despite the new title, the poem still opens with a journal notation. Slight as it is, this journal excerpt announces the writing which follows to be a collation of ideas which passed through Crispin's mind throughout his journey. The poem defines itself as a travelogue of his consciousness. In keeping with a logocentric emphasis on presence, "The Comedian" posits Crispin as the source of the utterance and the origin of its meaning. Crispin/Stevens is the final referent, which is capable of settling the play of language and guaranteeing a halt to the whirl of undecidable meanings. Like Rousseau's Confessions, to which Derrida refers so often, a travelogue is a diary-form that posits writing as debased or secondary to speech. Although a secondary means to speech, writing in this tradition is yet a means of guaranteeing the continued presence of one's speech and thoughts even after one is dead and truly absent, as Crispin is when the poem begins.

The poem's insistence upon the central evolving consciousness is evident semantically as well as formally. In part one, "The World Without Imagination," we are introduced to the two principal themes of the poem. The themes of poetic influence and of severance both repeat an onto-theological notion of presence. The theme of poetic influence is foregrounded from the very outset. Crispin's personal poetic relationship to his British Romantic forefathers and his desire to be self-begotten is what motivates him to embark on his quest. Only because he sees old world Europe as a "lost terrestrial" (CP 28) to him and his poetic enterprize can he become a poet in his own right. The theme of severance is hopelessly entangled in the first. Severance from one's homeland is symbolic of severance from one's earlier self in order to find one's "true" self or voice.

The personal nature of the second theme is self-evident, particularly when Crispin realizes that he must also leave behind the American "Maya sonneteers" (CP 30) in part two. These sonneteers, who "still to the night-bird made their plea" (CP 30), allegorically represent his own earlier Harvard style together with the kind of poetry written in America in the early nineteen hundreds (SP 29-36). Crispin/Stevens can now "brag" of being "much unlarged" and more "intricate" (CP 31) due to his sea voyage. He now feels able to reject the antiquated romance notion of the nightingale. The first theme is also fundamentally personal. The struggle with one's precursor(s), of which I speak here, is not the same as the depersonalized notion of intertextuality, wherein "voices" float through time and space, infecting and altering one another in a diachronic discourse. Like Browning's Childe Roland, Crispin/Stevens must address his own "fitness" or capacity "to stem verboseness in the sea" (CP 28). As the ancient Triton is now

"dissolved in shifting diaphanes" (CP 28), it is Crispin's desire to take over by ordering the sea's chaos with language. The sea, however, remains for him a "vocable thing" (CP 29). Its word is spoken but the word cannot be rendered meaningful; the signified shifts and only an undecipherable sequence of signifiers remains. This experience with the "ding an sich" (CP 29) does not devastate Crispin, but invests him with the will to embark on his quest for a sufficing aesthetic. To earn his own voice he has to turn inward and not to the "poems of plums" (CP 30) of his ancestors or his earlier poetry. The theme of poetic influence traces Crispin/Stevens' becoming a "freeman," even if his belatedness exposes him as a serio-comic "sonorous [nutshell] rattling inwardly" (CP 31).

In mutually reinforcing ways both themes reinstate a belief in the logocentric concept of the self. They do so by echoing the religious theme of the necessity of Christ's death to the transcendental Divine so as to be reborn into his full humanity, which alone will make him the true saviour of man. Stevens' aesthetic humanization of this religious theme translates into the poet's need to die to his grand precursors so as to be reborn in his own right as a poet capable of "[helping] people to live their lives" (NA 29) at the present time (OP 241). The paradox of dying-into-life is enacted in the fourth verse paragraph of part one. Here Stevens toys with the radical notion of destroying a mythology of self. This paragraph begins with the announcement of Crispin's dissolution or his annulment. At the eleventh hour, so to speak, Stevens pulls back from the abyss. The same verse paragraph ends by "pipping"--since trumpeting belongs to the bygone era of Triton[20]--what he "became" (CP 29). Dissolution and decreation do not lead to absence, a nothingness at the heart, but to becoming. By repeating with a

difference the fundamental paradox at the base of Christ's own nature, he shows that Crispin as modern poet must die into new life. Like Triton who continues to exist as a trace, a "faint, memorial gesturing" (CP 29), so too does the concept of Christ the son of Man, except now He is humanistically transformed into the figure of the poet as everyday man.[31] Mimicking the gods on a humanistic and much impoverished plain, Stevens, like the Romantics before him, still resorts to the onto-theologic notion of presence as final ground.

More than anyone else, Simone Weil taught Stevens the distinction between the nihilism of "destruction" and the potentially regenerative act of "decreation," as mentioned earlier. Not interested in the act of destroying (OP 165), Stevens was drawn to the power of poetically reducing things to their "uncreated" state (NA 174-75). This power harbored, simultaneously, the power to recreate. Stevens here wills the dissolution of the "ancient Crispin," but not so as to render him a figuration of nothingness or absence. Once he has broken his own self or poetic style, allegorically through Crispin, Stevens can recreate a new, more potent self out of this uncreated state. This new self is the "introspective voyager" (CP 29).[32] Peering into the sea-glass this poet-sailor, albeit skinny and stark, is saved from a nihilistic vision of the horror of the abyss or absolute nothingness at the core of being. Crispin "now beheld himself" (CP 28), and with this claim Stevens quietly but resolutely affirms the self as it exists at the present moment. "The Comedian" is not a rewriting of The Heart of Darkness; Crispin is not Kurtz.

The simple strength of being enables Crispin, despite his belatedness, to withstand the buffeting of a "century of wind" (CP 28). Consequently, even his belatedness is not the cause of extreme anxiety, because "what is is what should be"

(CP 41). In "Moment of Light," a poem by Jean Le Roy that Stevens translated, the ephebe poet's genealogical line takes on a menacingly black mise en abyme image:

> I feel an apparition,
> at my back,
> .....
> and then in back, one more;
> and then, still further back,
> still other men aligned;
> and then, toujours plus grands, immensities of night,
> who, less and less defined
> by light
> stretch off in the black:
>
> ancestors from the first days of the world. (OP 119)

This poet, however, covers over the horrors of the ever-recessive abyss by affirming the centrality of his own transcendent being:

> ...for the time, just one exists:
> I
> Just one exists and I am time,
> the whole of time.
> I am the whole of light.
> My flesh alone, for the moment, lives
> .....
> I am emblazoned, the others, all, are black. (OP 119-20)

This rare translation, written only a few years before "The Comedian,"[33] bears within itself a vision of being that Stevens willfully believed in and wished to resurrect in his first autobiographical, narrative poem. It entails belief in the Supreme Fiction of one's being self-begotten, even though the parodic form testifies to the impossibility of pure severance from those "toujours plus grands."

In continued support of his formal and semantic grounding of the self, Stevens consciously creates linguistic patterns which unceasingly spiral in a centripetal fashion. Time and again the reader is brought back to the cornerstone of

the poem--the letter "C", the questing comedian, Crispin. The unrelenting repetition of "C" sounds in "The Comedian" actually functions to prevent this poem from dissolving deconstructively into a sea of language and linguistic freeplay. Stevens has too strongly stamped this poem with his signature. Even though we meet Crispin on the sea, whose inscrutable alterity is immense enough to unmake him, its "polyphony" or "ubiquitous concussion" is "orchestrated," to use Stevens' word (L 352), by "one-sound strumming in his ear" (CP 28). This simple lutanist caught in the "brunt" of what Bakhtin would call the "poly- glossia" (The Dialogic Imagination 12, 431) is the figure who provides the base note. The sound of "C" may participate in derivative pitches. but the key of "C" is always, invariably returned to in an undoubtedly reassuring manner. "The Comedian" is not undone by the conflicting, "multitudinous tones" (CP 28). As it is about "C" sounds, it is a poem about hearing the harmonious interrelationship between "C" sounds, the common life, and the single center (L 352) that is the self.

There is, however, something perverse about these unrelenting "C" sounds that begin, after a while, to grate against the ear. The more positive interpretation is, as I have said, that the sounds successfully provide the text with a fixed linguistic center, which was important to Stevens. Consequently, the linguistic pattern is mimetic of the formal and semantic patterns, which privilege the self and its evolving consciousness as the center of the work. The alternative interpretation is more disturbing. While the repeated "C" sounds provide a fixed point of view or key note of the poem's principle melody, which ultimately enables all the "other" dissonant tones to work harmoniously together, the repetition itself becomes grating, stifling, closed, and imprisoning. To insist adamantly on the self as ground and as

fixed point of view, Stevens had to inhibit or curtail the discourse in the poem in a radical way. The rambunctious play of sound patterns in "The Comedian" is cagily deceptive. Although he exists in the larger language world, Bakhtin's "polyglossia," this lutanist does not and cannot truly open himself to its unrelenting dissonance and heterogeneity of language.[34]

To survive in the poetic form of the Romantic quest poem, the lyric consciousness must finally suppress the heterogeneity of alien discourses in favor of the homogeneous monologue. The language of Crispin, the poem's speaking consciousness or "voice," remains pure and single. The "C" sounds that lie beneath the flow of language are a cypher for the privileged consciousness that lies beneath the poem's formal, semantic, and linguistic structure. The privileging of this particular and singular sound is the simultaneous privileging and affirmation of the origin of that sound--Crispin/Stevens. The hierarchical valorization of a "beneath" is, in the logocentric tradition, aligned with the notion of an originary "origin". Both notions are evident even in the linguistic pattern of the poem. Stevens, himself, tells us that we are not to focus directly on the "C" sounds but are to think of them "incidently." We are to "hear" these sounds going on all the while in the "background," somewhere below our active consciousness (L 352).[35] In Of Grammatology, Derrida makes it clear that the relationship between being and voice is dependent on the notion that voice is to be heard. When "heard," voice succeeds in effacing the signifier and foregrounding the signified--the speaking self or consciousness (20). The willed repetition of "C" sounds marks Stevens' willed insistence on a center of consciousness, which will fix the poem's language in an intentionally controlled context.

According to Bakhtinian theory all poetic discourse is singular, unitary, and directly intentional language. As opposed to truly novelistic discourse, he writes,

> the language of the poetic genre is a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed. The concept of many worlds of language...is organically denied to poetic style.
>
> The world of poetry, no matter how many contradictions and insoluble conflicts the poet develops within it, is always illumined by one unitary and indisputable discourse. Contradictions, conflicts and doubts remain in the object, in thoughts, in living experiences--in short, in the subject matter--but they do not enter into the language itself. In poetry, even discourse about doubts must be cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted. (The Dialogical Imagination 286)

"Monologic steadfastness" is the end result of poetic discourse, because it is governed by a "single linguistic consciousness" (286). Such a consciousness must, however, be enormous since it is a Ptolemaic world in and of itself.

Crispin, that "insatiable egotist" (CP 30), is such a consciousness. The télos of his quest depends upon his presence or ego serving as the final, authorized signified, which is fixed and steady despite internal contradictions. The final six lines of the "Journal" poem too blatantly revealed this ground as the "subject" of the poem, and Stevens later excised them:

> As Crispin in his attic shapes the book
> That will contain him, he requires this end:
> The book shall discourse of himself alone,
> Of what he was, and why, and of his place,
> And of its fitful pomp and parentage.
> Thereafter he may stalk in other spheres.
> (Doggett and Buttel 45)

First, the "book" will inevitably be a monologic one; second, it will trace his noteworthy parentage both semantically through the theme of poetic influence and formally through the parodic mode; and, third, once he has written the book of himself, which is simultaneously a book about his "parents," he will have fulfilled

his poetic rite de passage and thereafter can confront "other spheres" (those later long poems which are riveted in alterity often against Stevens' will). In his notebook "Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets, Cahier I," Stevens returns to the subject of the artist's presence as the determining ground of writing. So important is this issue that he excised the following from the "Cahier" and inserted it as one of his "epigraphs" for the whole of Opus Posthumous: "the thing that is incessantly overlooked: the artist, the presence of the determining personality. Without that reality no amount of other things matter much" (OP unnumbered [xxxix]).

At the same time that "The Comedian" claims to be a quest poem in search of "the veritable ding an sich" (CP 29), Crispin's quest ultimately leads him safely away from the "essential scope" of a dialogic world to the "smart detail" (CP 38) of his egotistical, monologic world. Part four, "The Idea of a Colony," traces this radically bifurcated "moment." On the one hand, Crispin thinks that his quest inland has brought him to "the essential prose" (CP 36), the "prose/More exquisite than any tumbling verse" (CP 37), the "text" (CP 39), or the "veracious page on page, exact" (CP 40). At the end of part three, he even pays fleeting tribute to the Americana aesthetically endorsed in the poetry of a Whitman or a belated Williams: "The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence" (CP 36). For a brief moment Crispin seems to achieve a "blissful liaison/ Between himself and his environment" (CP 34) by following this sophomoric "Curriculum" (CP 36) in localist aesthetics.[36] On the other hand, this seeming thrust outward into the "rankness" (CP 36) of the world in all its heterogeneity is subtly but pointedly undercut by a reversal. At the same moment that Crispin thinks he is looking outward to the rank, prosaic world, the "river [poem] bore/ The vessel inward" (CP 36). From this point onward, the linear

voyage from Bordeaux to Carolina abruptly halts and the vertical voyage downward into the self begins: "His western voyage ended and began" (CP 37). Simply put, Stevens' quest for prose brings him back almost full circle to lyric poetry.

It is not surprising then that Crispin, seeking a "still new continent in which to dwell" (CP 37), ends up projecting a colony that is an enclosed "comprehensive island hemisphere" (CP 38). He never becomes a "Progenitor of...extensive scope" (CP 38); rather he remains the "magister of a single room" (CP 42), the self. The quest narrative collapses midway through the poem "Because he built a cabin who once planned/Loquacious columns by the ructive sea" (CP 41). The quest for loquaciousness is, however, doomed from the very outset, since the chosen form of the poem religiously bears testimony to the traditional hierarchy which inscribes the self at the center as the determining ground. The poem now repeatedly shies away from the heterogeneity of language and clings to the solidarity and singularity of the self, around which all "others" in the poem invariably revolve and acquire meaning, such as the ancestors who haunt his sleep (CP 39) and the daughters whose "capacious bloom" (CP 44) stop him in his door-yard. He is the center and origin of meaning, as well as the containing hemispherical boundary line who brings reality into his solipsistic mind/island. Like the turnip world that defies hermeneutical exegesis, Crispin comes not in "ancient purple," but "reproduced in purple" (CP 45). The modern-day poetic hero may be a figure of comic deflation for Stevens in the early 1920's, but he is still enrobed in purple.

In 1921 Stevens wrote of another magister of a single room. The infamous Hoon, in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," likewise wears the canonical purple robes and is represented as a humanized religious icon for the centrality of the logocentric

self. Recall Stevens' diction: "in purple I descended," "ointment," "hymns," "came not but from myself" (CP 65). Crispin also uses a religious diction in part four in reference to his new aesthetic: "central hymns," (CP 37), "the celebrants/Of rankest trivia" (CP 37), "a sacrament/And a celebration" of things as they are (CP 39), "novitiates" (CP 39), and "prodigal" (CP 39). Hoon is no more an other-worldly Christ-figure come to save mankind than is Crispin. Both are distinctly everyday men: one a colonizer and father and the other a sophisticated socialite. They are critical, insofar as they signify Stevens' willed privileging of presence, despite the paradoxical anabatic reality of a quotidian existence that progresses to a climax which is really a moment of peak sickness, as in a fever. Sapped of "rebellious thought," Crispin becomes ill when "blue infected will" (CP 40), according to Stevens' protracted trope of the course of a disease from its inception to its climactic breaking point. As the disease of bourgeois complacency and materialism climaxes with the creation of his fourth girl, it then explodes into a trajectory of metaphors:

> ...four blithe instruments
> Of differing struts, four voices several
> In couch, four more personae, intimate
> As buffo, yet divers, four mirrors blue
> That should be silver, four accustomed seeds
> Hinting incredible hues, four selfsame lights
> That spread chromatics in hilarious dark,
> Four questioners and four sure answerers. (CP 45)

Instantly, though, recomposure is achieved. From this string of multiplied metaphors, we fall into a gap on the page, and then resume again, calmly, with Crispin: "Crispin concocted doctrine from the rout" (CP 45). The rout, meaning disorder or the common herd or pack, exists in reality but it is stabilized, ordered, or held at bay in the context of Crispin's ego which provides the key note.

From section four through to six, Crispin sinks from realist to fatalist. Without even "discontent" to keep him mentally and artistically "prickling" (CP 40), he lives out his years in a "congenial sleep" (CP 42) so deep it is death-like. His wedding night offers no release from his centripetal spiralling down into the solipsistic self. Repeating four times in five lines some variation on the notion of falling down into the self (CP 42), Stevens then temporally speeds up "the presto of the morning" (CP 42) and the instant beginning of a lifetime of "trod[ding]" futilely "in a round" (CP 42). The mere going round of days and seasons--"presto of the morning" to "evenings like cracked shutters" (CP 42)--is all that remains for the explorer turned "Yeoman and grub" (CP 42). Like a grub buried in its grave-like earth-dwelling, Crispin is "concealed/ And covered" in a pure, impenetrable, lyric "solitude" (CP 42).

Given the formal dictates of the poem, Crispin can no more leave the realm of the lyric than he can arrive at Carolina when it is the "polar-purple" world of a "winter's vacancy" (CP 34). In accordance with the poem's formal intentionality, our "poetic hero" must arrive in a spring-time world. The time is undoubtedly "abhorrent" to this supposed "searcher for the fecund minimum" (CP 35), but not because Crispin/Stevens has actually entered the prosaic realm of the heteroglossia. The spring is disgusting to him because he is, in "The Comedian," still a lyric poet and "Lyric poets are bothered by spring" (OP 220). By the end of part three, Crispin feels most purified by his insights into the prosaic nature of reality. At this moment, however, he is most blind. The "reality" to which he has actually committed himself, consciously or unconsciously, is the lyric reality of the artist's determining presence. Crispin seems so lyrically "purified" (CP 36) in the final

three sections that he gradually loses any sense of physicality. He becomes pure lyric ego as he "slid from his continent by slow recess/To things within his actual eye" (CP 40). Even the act of having children renders him as something of "The sugared void" (CP 43) on which the girls eventually nibble. The son who at the commencement of the poem had to assert a giant-like presence in the face of his absent fathers is now, himself, as absent father in the presence of his proliferating daughters. In the poem's final movement Crispin could be described in terms that Stevens uses in "Stars at Tallapoosa": "the body is no body to be seen/But is an eye that studies its black lid" (CP 71). In "The Comedian as the Letter C," Crispin is truly a "prodigal" son (CP 39). We leave him seemingly poised and suspended in the gateway, stopped by his own "capacious bloom," which was to thrust him headlong into the realm of the actual. Yet, the poem keeps informing us that Crispin/Stevens has actually returned to repeat the onto-theologic notion of the self. As the sole governing, "hermit" ego presented in the poem, Crispin is thus the sacred repository of meaning as ensconced by time and tradition in the genre's hierarchy. He is also the controlling tyrant. The poem's closed formal, semantic, and monologic linguistic patterns keep bringing us down, inward, and back to the egocentric center of consciousness which lies at the heart of this web of language and gives it meaning. The "anecdote" of Crispin is clearly "doctrinal...in design" (CP 45), "as Crispin willed" (CP 45).

Crispin's quest fails insofar as he does not penetrate the "rout" or "return to social nature" (CP 43). He remains a "hermit" ego; thus, he is a hermetically sealed lyric consciousness not capable of permitting the existence of any truly "other," competing consciousness.[37] The poem that is the inscription of his lyric

mind is closed, fixed, and monologic. The quest succeeds brilliantly, however, in that it fulfills the ephebe's necessary repetition of his forefathers. In many respects, the poem traces Crispin/Stevens' prodigal journey, not forward "into time to come," but "to backward flights" (CP 39) as he "vociferate[s] again" (CP 33) the logocentric self as praised by his ancestor poets.

The will to make poetry and the materia poetica, the self, into one indivisible unit turns "The Comedian," finally, into the weak poem that it is. When the authorized center of the self becomes "purified," Crispin's western voyage "ended" and his circling down into a closed self "began" (CP 37). Midway through the poem, the narrative collapses. Although Stevens struggled to end the poem, by adding onto the "Journal" poem two bleakly prophetic sections of marital life, he never again returned to the Romantic model. The experimental quest that he undertook in writing such a poem failed, yet the cost of the failure was recompensed by his hard-earned knowledge that the time for the logocentric self to be reconstituted as solid ground had passed. Never again in his long poems would the self act as that "something given to make whole among/The ruses that were shattered by the large" (CP 30). This knowledge "blasted" Stevens out of his "luminous traversing" (CP 30) and into six years of silence, a silence which verged on becoming the "untimely grave" it was for the Alastor poet. Instead, as we know, "The Comedian" proved to be "a timely utterance," to use Wordsworth's words. It eventually became the gateway to an abundance of long poems that claimed--"I again am strong." Yet the "I" of these later long poems is no longer the stable referent, the transcendental signified in Stevens' godless, humanized realm, who could shed light and meaning on the writing. These texts, as Roland

Barthes would say, read "without the inscription of the Father" (Image-Music-Text 161).

ENDNOTES

[1]For my understanding of Nietzsche's gateway, I am particularly indebted to J. Hillis Miller's Preface and Postface in his The Linguistic Moment, From Wordsworth to Stevens (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[2]"Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" appeared in a 1935 volume of Poetry magazine (XLV, Feb. 1935, 239-49; CP 150-58).

[3]For a select reading of those who see "The Comedian" as the culmination of the various stances of the self in Harmonium see: Joseph Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye 93; David M. La Guardia, Advance on Chaos 49-50; Rajeev S. Patke, The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens 31; and John Serio, "'The Comedian' as the Idea of Order in Harmonium," in Papers on Language and Literature, 12, No. 2 (Winter 1976), 87.

[4]For an understanding of these revisions see A. Walton Litz's "'From the Journal of Crispin': An Early Version of 'The Comedian as the Letter C'," in Doggett and Buttel 3-45.

[5]Frank Kermode underscores this "belief" by grounding it in an ontological claim: "it strikes me as testimony to the way our minds work when confronted by a problematical text; we find it easier to think about it if we imagine something behind it rather different from what we have in front of us" (The Genesis of Secrecy 79).

[6]Recall Nietzsche's claim that "There is no such thing as cause" because "the supposed instinct for causality is only fear of the unfamiliar and the attempt to discover something familiar in it..." (WP 295, 297).

[7]Despite "The Comedian"'s radically dissimilar form, Helen Vendler claims that his later poems can be "heard" in this first long poem; consequently, she posits a "'continuous' Stevens" (OEW 54). A. Walton Litz sees this poem as a "pivotal stage" marking the end of Stevens' introspective voyage (120), which naturally precedes his thirties poems of order and socio-political consciousness (IV 177). Litz's position conceals a developmental metaphor based on human nature in general: thus, as man develops from childhood to youth to maturity there is an increasing distance established between the subject and the object enabling him to move from subjective expression of his emotions towards eventually a conceptual comprehension of the objective world. My ideas here are indebted to William Rogers, who discusses Cassirer's theory of language development in his book The Three Genres and The Interpretation of the Lyric (39).

[8]In The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens, Daniel Fuchs sees Stevens' dandiacal style as "a parody of a stately, grand style and a burlesque of a poet who cannot possess one" (24).

[9]Denis Donoghue, in Connoisseurs of Chaos, claims that Stevens' work is dominated by a "mythology of self" that ultimately eradicates history (194). "Hence

there is no authority," he writes, "but the poet himself, no structures of belief but the structures he makes for his own appeasement" (191). Transforming history into mythology, the poet becomes the sole center: his fictions "would be in the image of its creator, it would be amenable to the whole range of his powers, it would always be under his control..." (193). I disagree strongly with Donoghue on the basis that the desire for control over language and being is not always actualized in praxis.

[10]My methodology is a conscious inversion of Bloom's, who places his theoretical chapter at the end of his 374 pages of close textual readings. The sheer weight of "evidence" makes his summative theory seem indispensable. Although Bloom prefers a "deferment of theory" (PC viii), he appreciates that many readers may be best to start with the theory or else read it in conjunction with his analysis.

[11]Fish defends himself against the subjectivity that Walker cannot escape. In his essay, "How to Recognize a Poem," Fish writes that "all objects are made and not found, and that they are made by the interpretive strategies we set in motion. This does not, however, commit me to subjectivity because the means by which they are made are social and conventional. That is, the 'you' who does the interpretative work that puts poems and assignments and lists into the world is a communal you and not an isolated individual" (American Criticism in the Poststructuralist Age 110).

[12]David Walker's reader, as described in The Transparent Lyric, is similarly granted subjective priority over the text. The transparent text becomes an emptiness that the reader must fill with meaning. Hence, the reader's role is to be "self-consciously distanced from the scene he observes" so as to "[invest] it imaginatively with a meaning it does not otherwise have" (24).

[13]See M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall's influential study The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[14]Rosenthal and Gall describe the motivating force behind the modern lyrical epic poem as follows: "the modern sequence has evolved out of a serious need for an encompassing poetry, one completely involved with what our lives really mean subjectively. That need reflects the ultimate pressure on modern sensibility to understand itself and to regain what Olson called the 'human universe.' The pressure, right or wrong, is to reconceive reality in humanly reassuring ways rather than the chillingly impersonal ones" (The Modern Poetic Sequence 10-11). In short, the psychical need "on each poet's part [is] to mobilize and give direction to otherwise scattered energies" (9).

[15]See James E. Miller Jr.'s book entitled T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land, Exorcism of the Demons (Univ. Park and London: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1977).

[16]In "Academic Discourse at Havana," written at the same time as "The Comedian" but published later, Stevens writes of the poet that

As a part of nature he is part of us.
His rarities are ours: may they be fit
And reconcile us to our selves in those
True reconcilings, dark, pacific words,
And the adroiter harmonies of their fall. (CP 144)

[17]Milton J. Bates refers to the significant role Pitts Sanborn, a novelist and music critic, played in initiating Stevens into the New York avant-garde in the 1914's after the infamous Armory Show of Post-Impressionist art (Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self 70). Also see Peter Brazeau's Parts of a World, wherein he discusses Stevens as being "in touch with the avant-garde on both sides of the Atlantic" (9), due to his relations with Walter Arensberg and the international artists he and his wife entertained.

[18]Hutcheon rightly points out the bifurcated root of the word "parody," itself. Etymologically, the Greek noun parodia means "countersong," while the latter odos means "song." A parody is a song that contains within itself its own countersong. The prefix, para, also posits two antithetical meanings simultaneously: "counter" or "against" and "beside" (32). The parodic mode is also Janus-faced and, hence, an apt mode for this poem which I began by describing in the same manner.

[19]In Doctor Faustus by Thomas Mann, Adrian says, "I fled from this exaggerated sense of the comic into theology, in the hope that it would give relief to the tickling--only to find there too a perfect legion of ludicrous absurdities. Why does almost everything seem to me like its own parody? Why must I think that almost all, no, all the methods and conventions of art today are good for parody only?" (134).

[20]Recall Stevens' self-contradictory Adagia entries: "Poetry is a health," "Poetry is a cure of the mind" (OP 176) and "Originality is an escape from repetition" (OP 177).

[21]Stevens well understood and envied the plush stage of his great ancestor Whitman, who could validate his entire poetic enterprise on the unequivocal assumption that "what I assume you shall assume" (Leaves 22). Like mirrors facing mirrors, all men were "duplicates of [him]self" (63). Even in as late a poem as "The Auroras of Autumn," Stevens nostalgically describes a "once-upon-a-time" unity between men and the world they shared. Betrayed by the double repetition of the word "thought," Stevens adopts a similar Whitmanian image of synchronized minds:

And each of the other thought--in the idiom
Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth,
.....
We were as Danes in Denmark all day long
And knew each other well, hale-hearted landsmen,
.....
.....We thought alike
And that made brothers of us in a home

In which we fed on being brothers. (CP 419)

But for the late Stevens, this dream-fiction is dissolved with a cruel luminosity. "This drama that we live" in the twentieth century is not the comic vision of the Danes, but something darker and verging on tragedy, as implied by his descriptive words "hanging," "disaster," "bare," and "sharp" (CP 419).

[22]Some twenty years later, Stevens articulated the necessity for poetry to follow the "process of personality of the poet" (NA 45). Using Aristotle, he clarified that this claim did not involve using the poet as the subject of his poems.

[23]In 1935 Stevens recollects that "when Harmonium was in the making there was a time when I liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together. I then believed in pure poetry, as it was called...But we live in a different time, and life means a good deal more to us now-a-days..." (L 288).

[24]Oxford English Dictionary.

[25]For accounts of the autobiographical elements in "The Comedian" see Milton J. Bates Wallace Stevens, A Mythology of Self 117-126, and Peter Brazeau's Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered 99, 101, 122. Grosvenor Powell, in "Wallace Stevens' Approaches to the Absolute: From Crispin's Quest to Central Poetry," traces the critical differences between Crispin and the poet, Stevens. These differences mark the gap between Stevens' desire for romantic transcendentalism epitomized in Crispin and his personal philosophic assumptions rooted in the despair of knowing that the ding an sich can never be realized directly (Southern Review, 1979, 15: 792-810).

[26]Also see Bloom's 1968 essay entitled "The Internalization of Quest Romance," in The Ringers in the Tower 18.

[27]Frank Lentricchia recounts the arrival of Georges Poulet to Johns Hopkins and his influence on J. Hillis Miller, who subsequently brought American criticism beyond formalism's dry aestheticism and into the rich subterranean depths of the consciousness (After the New Criticism 63-70).

[28]NA, 31.

[29]Earlier in the poem, Ammons creates an analogy for the poet/reader relationship in that of the intimacy shared by a husband and wife. It is an intimacy which yet welcomes "chasms of difference" (Tape 85). For my interests, note that this analogy still reinforces a poet (male) and reader (female) dichotomy. Both Stevens and Ammons, as writers of long poems, want their masculinity or potency reinforced by a "feminine" reader, on whom they can "plunge" themselves with the violence of their imaginative energies.

[30]It is interesting to note that "tritons" are marine gastropods with trumpet-shaped shells (OED).

[31]In Adelaide Kirby Morris' Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith, she studies Stevens' poetry to show that "as the Supreme Fiction overthrew the Supreme Being, it assumed many of the accoutrements of traditional religion" (4). Therefore, she writes: "If, in Stevens' series of substitutions, God is the imagination and the Holy Ghost is the imagination inhering in man, Christ becomes imagination incarnate: the poet or hero" (121). Writing to Hi Simons in 1940, Stevens concedes that "it is a habit of mind with me to be thinking of some substitute for religion" (L 348).

[32]Daniel Fuchs, in The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens, writes that the poem is "nothing less than finding a new self, the old self being forgotten beyond possibility of recall" (34). The use of the parodic form, however, necessitates the constant recollection of the earlier self, as linked to the precursor poets. The comedy lies in the juxtaposition, as does the bitterness.

[33]Samuel French Morse has it from Walter Pach that the translation was written by Stevens specifically for The Modern School, edited by Carl Zigrosser and printed in 1918 (OP xxiv-v).

[34]I am arguing against Bloom's claim that "The Comedian" is a "wilderness of differences" and a radically "heterogeneous" text (PC 72). Parody is a hybrid discourse and in it "two languages are crossed with each other, as well as two styles, two linguistic points of view, and in the final analysis two speaking subjects" (Bakhtin, 76). Stevens' poem parodies the form and, by extension, those who practiced that form. The voices of the various Romantic poets congeal into a representative whole, which forms the backgrounded text of the parody. In this respect, the poem does not permit into its perimeters any unrelated discourses. I agree with Helen Vendler's claim that "His preferred view of totality is not the heterogeneous but a great One..." (OEW 50), but only as it applies principally to "The Comedian."

[35]In an earlier letter to Ronald Lane Latimer dated 1935, Stevens emphasizes the comedic effect of the various "C" sounds in the poem but claims that he does not wish to do this, because "readers might have read the poem with ears like elephants' listening for the play of this sound...I did not mean that every time the letter C occurs in the poem it should take the stage" (L 294).

[36]See David L. Green's "'The Comedian as the Letter C', Carlos, and Contact," Twentieth Century Literature, Fall 1981, 27 (3): 262-271; and Martha Strom's "Wallace Stevens' Revisions of Crispin's Journal: A Reaction Against the 'Local'," American Literature, May 1982, 54 (2): 258-276.

[37]In 1940 Stevens wrote to Hi Simons about the "strong spirit." Notice how his claims pertain to Crispin. He writes, "Most people stand by the aid of philosophy, religion and one thing or another, but a strong spirit...stands by its own strength. Even such a spirit is subject to degeneration...If men have nothing external to them on which to rely, then, in the event of a collapse of their own spirit, they must naturally turn to the spirit of others" (L 348). Throughout the course of the poem, Crispin's strength of being becomes too purified and absolute.

His collapse and degeneration midway through the narrative leads to his suffocation in his own solipsistic, monologic world of one. In Stevens' later long poems, the poetic hero who will suffice will be a "collective being" (CP 299) or "the human globe... Who in a million diamonds sums us up" (CP 250).

CHAPTER III

THE NEW THEATRE: HAUNTED BY "PLATO'S GHOST"

"Let me, therefore, remain the stranger
But let me tell you, that to approach the stranger
Is to invite the unexpected, release a new force,
Or let the genie out of the bottle.
It is to start a train of events
Beyond your control."

T. S. Eliot
The Cocktail Party

I. A Rousseauistic Interpreter in a (Textual) Place of Loss

As he passed through the Janus-faced gateway, in the act of writing "The Comedian as the Letter C," Stevens most fully entered into what he bluntly called "a world without religion" (L 348), which could be for him at this time only a place of loss. While he attempted to face his passage with bravado, the reader of "Farewell to Florida" is only too conscious of what Stevens himself could not suppress. Stevens' own rhetoric betrays him. The insurgent cries announcing a dead past and a newly freed poetic voice are thin compared to his particularly lurid, sensual descriptions of his by-gone feminine, Southern poetics, enhanced by his tropes of bondage, stripping, whispering, and forgetting (CP 117).[1] In fear of the "unexplored seas" that lay ahead, to return to Nietzsche's figuration of "passing through," Stevens (as much as twelve years after writing "The Comedian") again comes back to the moment: to recollect it nostalgically this time. Unable fully to accept this moment as one which ruthlessly divides or severs the knowable past from the abyss of the ever unknowable future, Stevens wills to interpret it as a moment which benevolently, if somewhat redundantly, restores one to the beginning yet again. Stevens' idea that "writing again after a discontinuance seems to take

one back to the beginning rather than to the point of discontinuance" (L 265) linguistically oscillates, however. While the concept of discontinuance necessarily implies and promises the alternate and traditionally more consoling concept of continuance, his repetition of the word betrays his confidence as illusory, by underscoring the incurable gouge or gap that has indeed severed the canon.

Not surprisingly Stevens' next long poem, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," opens with a revitalized image of Whitman, once more walking and professing faith in his unity poetics, like a reborn Lazarus brought back from the dead. Ironically, however, as the poem continues, the reader quickly realizes that the line of continuance to the past cannot be completely restored or sustained even tentatively, despite Stevens' desire to return to the knowable past. When the final word of "The Comedian" was written--that word being "clipped"-- Stevens irrevocably marked the abyss and his passage through it from the monological to the dialogical; from the consolations of the trope of the line to the fear of perpetual wandering in error;[2] from the grammar of the traditional story to the grammatological play of language.[3]

When we interrogate "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," "Owl's Clover," and "The Man with the Blue Guitar," we confront texts that are, themselves, unknowable/unreadable seas, which resist our charting of them and leave us to wander in error likewise. By challenging and dismantling lyric autotelism, by resisting formalist principles of closure, and by introducing us to a larger language context wherein language is never simple or stable but endlessly supplementary, these texts teach us to read deconstructively or for difference. Beginning with these three texts we will soon learn that Stevens' long poems do not form the core to a

canon that is a "single text, granite monotony" (CP 394). The grammar of the traditional story has been "clipped"--the line has been complicated--and we are left to wander in a canon, as in poems, which is a maze of traces as well as of lines leading nowhere. By the time we reach "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," we realize that without the mnemonic device of the traditional narrative we have forgotten both where we were and where we are going; in short, we have been wandering all along. This triptych of poems does not and cannot move toward closure; their télos is their archē, for they "conclude" not with a way out of this maze of traces, but with "notes" for a way to begin--again.

What unwittingly emerges with "Like Decorations" is "the eccentric" (CP 151), that "revealing aberration" (CP 153), which Stevens will now continually find "to be the base" of a "design" (CP 151) in which he necessarily believes although it repeatedly defies his grasp. In a letter written to Ronald Lane Latimer four months before the poem's first publication,[4] Stevens again speaks of the "off-normal": "I never feel that I am in the area of poetry until I am a little off the normal," and yet "the worst part of this aberration is that I am convinced that it is not an aberration" (L 287). Stevens' willed belief in "design" and "order," capable of embracing aberrational deviations, is stubbornly rooted in the logocentric notion of a center which will stabilize his poetic structures while creating boundary lines of permittable play within these structures. As Derrida says, "By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form" (Writing and Difference 278-79).[5] The notion of the total form which can embrace and, so doing, synthesize contradiction is seriously challenged, however, by the idea that what makes the "aberration"

"revealing" is that it resists totalization, necessarily.[6] The aberration is that fissure which always prevents pure synthesis, complete closure, harmonious coherence.[7] It is already implicated in the text because the stabilizing center as full presence or point of no substitutions--a point absolutely beyond the play of such substitutions--is an impossibility. Stevens' desire to grasp "the base" of the "design" (the desire for a centered structure) is invariably punctured by the inescapable existence of "the aberration," the "off-normal," the mysterious "X".

The existence of the unsayable, and hence ungroundable, results in texts which are "a system of differences" (Derrida, WD 280) that cannot, finally, be stabilized by reference to a transcendental signified. The continuation of his canon may be testimony to Stevens' ongoing "search for a tranquil belief" (CP 151), but that ground is perpetually deferred or delayed. In looking for what Derrida calls "a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play" (279), Stevens discovers never the center but always its substitute.

The fissure in the very structure of Stevens' canon could then be interpreted as similar to the "rupture" that Derrida recognizes in the very "structure" of the history of Western metaphysics. Despite "the desire for a center," without which the notion of structure itself would be impossible, Derrida shows that

> it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. (WD 280).

He depicts this "moment as one which "decentered" the very "structurality of structure" on which the Western épistémé rested. In his seminal article, entitled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," he writes that

> This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse . . . That is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (280, emphasis mine)

What Derrida calls "the absence of the transcendental signified," Stevens calls "a world of universal poverty" (CP 152).

Upon the moment of entry to this place of loss, Stevens must face two things: the decentering of the ground and its ramifications and, relatedly, the advent of radical alterity. First, the decentering of the ground--and the emergence of an inevitable angst with the radical instability that is now seen at the heart of every "once upon a time" seemingly stable structure--is imaged almost literally by Stevens. He depicts a world of an invariable presence as a "gutted world" (CP 159), the very ground of which has been blown wide open and fissured as if by volcanic eruption. Tropes of architectural demise function similarly. For example, in "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)," Stevens emphasizes a world devoid of a unifying ground (God, self, "theme") through images of a toppled classical structures; hence, the world no longer rests on pillars or can be seen through arches, and "the hotel is boarded and bare" (CP 135).[8] Lacking "the essential theme" (CP 135), "the central composition" (CP 135) cannot reconstitute itself with absolute certainty. The ground has shifted, the architectural strongholds have been toppled indiscriminately, and there exists no resting place where truth emerges but only endless supplementarity in an "autumn"--the season of "turning"--which "will be perpetual" (CP 152).

Second, with the eruptions and fissuring of the traditional classical ground is the inevitable dismissal of the logocentric self, referred to nostalgically by Stevens

as "the warm antiquity of self" (CP 139) in "A Fading of the Sun." In this place of loss it is truly impossible to write a Whitmanian "Song of Myself," such as Stevens attempted to do in the early 1920's. While Crispin was so isolated and self-sufficient that even "contact with men and women...would have been a catastrophe" (L 295) for him, this later poetic voice is pushed into "society." Throughout these three texts we see the poetic voice transformed from a self-determining lutanist to a folk guitarist, who has been requested to sing the music of the people, a music beyond the people, and a music of things as they are in reality (CP 165). Stevens' concern for society is only peripherally political, however, despite pressure from his contemporaries to be a politically active poet in a period when such activity was considered mandatory.[9] Rather, "society" functions metonymically for "otherness," that which is "alien," or again, a generative multiplicity that is irreducible, a "strange[ness]" that cannot be balanced (CP 181).

Wandering in the radical alterity, which is the discourse of this "gutted world" without a God or transcendental signified, the large, lyrical "I" finds its autonomous homogeneity--in fact, its very self-integrity--seriously challenged and complicated by the dissenting traces of other voices which decenter the monologic, lyric cogito. Without "the bride" of imagination, whom the poet of "Ghosts as Cocoons" summons but cannot locate (regardless of his quadruple demanding repetition of the word "where"), we are left with only subversive figures--"butcher, seducer, bloodman, reveller" (CP 119)--or chains of unresting supplements that constitute "this mangled, smutted semi-world hacked out/Of dirt" (CP 119).[10] Not only is the bride, Stevens' trope for the transcendental signified, never naked and revealed, as mentioned at the end of chapter one, but she is also always unlocatable,

necessarily. She is "the central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute" (Derrida, WD 280). She is the nonlocus; she is never present outside of the mangled, smutted world from which she is always absent.

Living in "a world permanently enigmatical" (L 246) and learning to find delight in it were, for Stevens, two very different things. While he could accept the former, the latter came only with great difficulty. Crispin, we must remember, was a colonizer and, like a true colonizer, he came to inhabit a new and strange place, but he always remained under the control of the parent country. "The Comedian as the Letter C" is a parodic poem because Stevens could not freely transgress the poetics of his forefathers, a notably logocentric poetics, without simultaneously paying tribute to it. Even in 1937, with the writing of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," we see Stevens inhabiting this place of loss, which the guitarist/poet must patch even though he cannot bring it "quite round" (CP 165). In section 28, the lyrical "I" twice asserts that he is "a native in this world" and "not a native of a mind/Thinking thoughts I call my own" (CP 180). The guitarist, like Crispin before him, still wills to believe that he can make "a singular collation" (CP 37) out of this modern-day "'hoard of destructions'" (CP 173). Tonally speaking, the poem is riddled with vestiges of nostalgia and belief in the human self, "not that gold self aloft" (CP 176), and its power to reconcile harmoniously "The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone" (CP 176). Eager to make man a native in his world, Stevens invariably clings to the self. For the self stands to represent the logocentrically sanctioned center, which alone enables him to make sense of the world in all its contradictoriness and without which even brief release from the "actual stone" (CP

184) would be tragically impossible. Only with the writing of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" does Stevens begin to learn to delight in this place of loss, wherein man is inescapably a foreigner, not a native. In 1942 Stevens could proclaim that poetry springs from the acceptance that "we live in a place/That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves/And hard it is in spite of blazoned days" (CP 383). Condemned to wander, the poet cannot escape the "fat girl" who is "familiar yet an aberration" (CP 406). But the issue of pleasure in such play is the topic of our next chapter.

Let me sum up and indicate the direction in which we are moving by first adding that, at the time of writing "Like Decorations," "Owl's Clover," and "Blue Guitar," Stevens can be best described as a Rousseauistic interpreter, or one who is preoccupied more than not with the "loss of the center," as defined by Derrida (WD 292). As he learns to find pleasure in the nonlocus, beginning with "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," he becomes a more Nietzschian interpreter. Using Rousseau metonymically, Derrida aligns the sense of a lost or inaccessible presence or origin with nostalgia, guilt, and the negative because the dream of an origin or truth beyond play can never be made a reality; in short, the fall from the Logos is irreversible but the desire to return is insuppressible. To think as Nietzsche did is, in Derridian thinking, not to seek truth or origin, but to affirm radical play without recourse to or desire for any stabilizing or consoling ground. In his notes to Writing and Difference, Derrida renames these two "interpretations of interpretation" as "the rabbinical" (for him who seeks to trek the road back to the original truth) and "the poetical" (for him who can affirm the play of supplementarity) (311, 4n). Stevens' three long poems of the 1930's appear to be governed by the

"Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play": "an ethic of the nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence in speech...an ethic, nostalgia, and even remorse" (292). With the appearance of "Notes" in the 1940's, the other side of such play, a Nietzschian affirmation, becomes more prominent: "this is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin...it plays without security ...[and] also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace" (292). Again, however, we are ahead of ourselves.

II. "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery": The Purple Bird's Struggle

"Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" is a poem which is rarely, if ever, treated extensively. Helen Vendler's fourteen pages in On Extended Wings constitute, perhaps, one of the most thorough readings of this first major long poem after Stevens' self-imposed exile from poetic life. Rajeev Patke does not deal with the poem at all in his book-length study of Stevens' long poems, entitled The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens (1985). Only two references to the poem are made by Joseph Riddel in The Clairvoyant Eye (1965), and only a healthy handful more are made by A. Walton Litz in his 1972 study, Introspective Voyager. Lastly, while Bloom makes several references to the poem, he treats it as a minor experiment which failed but which provided Stevens with a way to the greater "Blue Guitar" poem (PC 106-107, 117). It appears that, from the mid-1960's through to the mid-1980's, the poem has continued to be treated as a minor, largely ignorable piece.

Why has this poem been passed by so consistently? Disciplined to believe in themselves and all readers as Kermodian "fulfillment men," these critics have

consistently attempted to jam the poem into a form or genre which they know and with which they feel comfortable: a linear, teleological whole, which is expressive of a developing self at the center. Unable to deal with the radical eccentricity of this poem, they deny acknowledging those poetical elements which refuse to be fitted into their structures. Consider, by way of example, Helen Vendler's reading. While "Like Decorations" is an experiment in "the poetry of disconnection," which Vendler cites as Stevens' "most adequate form" (OEW 65), the discontinuities are so blatant and stubborn in this poem that even though the fifty fragments do not reform a whole, "we must assume he thought it a viable whole" (66). But, if we cannot swallow this fragmentary "vision" (65), then we can simply forget the problems the poem poses by throwing it back into Stevens' canon, wherein it mysteriously becomes whole in the context of a yet larger whole: "His wholes were always melting into each other, of course; his work was all one poem to him, clearly, but y t he did divide it into parts" (66, emphasis mine). Furthermore, because the poem presents fifty sections which defy linear or narrative development, Vendler redefines the notion of its unity rather than challenges it: a "radical, not linear" (71) totality. "If this is poetry of meditation," writes Vendler, for whom it cannot be anything other, "it does not have the sustained progressive development that we know in other meditative poets; it is rather the staccato meditation of intimation and dismissal, of fits and starts... the play of the mind and sensibility over a topic [decay and death]" (71). Consequently, by defining the poem as circling around and around its central topic--the mind of the self contemplating death--Vendler is willing to say that the poem engages in play. Granting play with the one hand, however, she circumscribes it with the other. The moment of her

insight is the moment of her blindness, for she is blind to the way she has completely paralyzed any possibility for true play by virtue of grounding the poem in a center or a point of presence which is "safely" beyond play.[11] What Vendler wishes to find in this poem is a centered structure, a central fundamental ground which will, and must, limit the play of language so that meaning is "retrievable." Subsequently, if the poem does not provide us, the readers, with the bridges to make our way safely back to "the truth" or "the meaning," then we must build them for ourselves (Vendler 65; Litz 185). Part of the logocentric play is that the center is there somewhere but, as Litz writes, "the key is missing" (IV 185). To play the critical games properly is to turn towards that lost presence and attempt to restore it.

Hopefully I have already intimated why "Like Decorations" is a more interesting poem than the logocentric critical tradition can appreciate. At the very moment that these critics have attempted to "read" the poem along the familiar, well-established lines of a developing lyrical cogito, which can bring all discrepancies and alien factors into synthesis, they have been blind to the poem's refusal to be mapped due to its announcement of the unfamiliar. "Like Decorations" is testimony both to the desire for system, grid, and monisms--and to its frustration. Rather than look for that with which we are familiar, perhaps we are to attempt to face that which is foreign to us.

From the moment the poem opens, it appears to close. First, the introductory image of the prophetic Whitman instantly locates the reader on "safe," knowable ground. Metaphorically aligned with the patriarchal sun, the figure of Whitman is remarkably consoling to the reader. In order to approach this new long

poem, the reader can use the figure of Whitman as a sanction for recalling Whitman's theory of the long poem and for applying such theory to this modern-day "equivalent" poem by the son. One recalls, therefore, Whitman's acceptance of Poe's theory of the long poem, as expressed in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads." (Note, also, the implied logocentric metaphor of the chain of transmission between poetic fathers and sons.) Like the form of the long poem itself, Whitman felt that he could "contradict" himself and "contain multitudes" (72), but "the trunk and centre whence the answer was to radiate, and to which all should return from straying however far a distance, must be an identical body and soul, a personality--which personality, after many considerations and ponderings deliberately settled should be myself--indeed could not be any other" (451, emphasis mine). Second, Whitman's naming of the center is repeatedly reinforced by tropes of the line. For although he "tramp[s] a perpetual journey" (68), during which time "there is no stoppage and never can be stoppage" (67), Whitman's tropes of weaving circumvent the possibility of radical play.[12] What play there is in Leaves of Grass is only permittable within the boundary lines enforced by the center and the power of that lyrical center to 'thread a thread through my poems" (17).[13] Third, the reader is tempted to see Stevens as a modern equivalent of the romantic prophet-poet, who is "wandering" (52) in a world wherein all things, in Whitman's language, are "leading...harmlessly through [him]" via "instant conductors all over [him]" (45).[14] In this regard, the poet is seen as huge enough to provide totality to a universe of difference.

It is in this fashion that critics have tended to read "Like Decorations": recognizing while simultaneously overlooking disjointedness, logocentric critics have

tended to synthesize the fragments, even superficially, into a larger, harmonious whole.[15] Since the wandering son, like the wandering father before him, "ought to be a poet constantly" (L 274) or not at all, then the daily accretion of his experiences forms the materia poetica of his art. As a poet, he is to weave the pieces into a whole fabric. Where discrepancies or tears in the text(ile) occur unaccountably, they can be covered over or healed by the all-embracing self. Even the logocentric critic is not disturbed by such ruptures. Stevens' critics reiterate again and again, for example, that Stevens wrote these seemingly disjointed piece under very disjointed circumstances: "on the way to and from the office" (L 272). Notice, by way of example, how Litz smooths over the unaccountable in this poem by twice referring to the fragments as excerpts from a private workbook and, by doing so, makes the fragments rich with a "deep," "personal" meaning. He writes,

> They appear to be entries from a poetic notebook, as if the 'Schemata' or Adagia had been turned into verse, and Stevens had made a virtue out of their disjointed nature. The three- and four-line stanzas are deliberately compressed, almost like short-hand entries in a notebook, and this condensation produces both a sense of immediacy and a controlled allusiveness. (IV 183, emphasis mine)

Apart from locating the synthesizing center, the self who alone knows the code to the almost journalistic short-hand, Litz captures the notion of play in the poem and its instantaneous circumvention in the oxymoronic phrase "controlled allusiveness." In short, the critics close the poem into a neat, aesthetic monad, whole in itself and yet merely a link in a canonical chain.[16]

As long as the poem is read in terms of "the line" or linearity, then the poem will be reduced to the monological. "Meaning" and "truth" will remain the governing onto-theological concepts, and they will be revealed with the arrival at the telos. Vendler's reading remains stubbornly logocentric, even though she

recognizes "Like Decorations" to be "a poetry of disconnection" (OEW 65). Her tropes of the line (the segments form a "chain," 65) and the circle (an "autonomy...[that] exist[s] simultaneously," 71) belong to a metaphysics of presence. One may wander, but such wandering is anything but problematical. The moments of privilege are the moments of departure (arche) and of return (telos): "Stevens' choice to express no preference among these responses, except by the implicit preference accorded by convention to the beginning and end" (Vendler 66, emphasis mine). Assuming a central and invariable presence, Vendler employs a rhetoric that reduces difference in the poem to a centered structure that is, in the final analysis, sensible, coherent, balanced, and understandable. Need I add that, where the poem provides no bridges, we are to make them and so to create meaning--as it is our responsibility to do. Not unlike the impoverished Donne who beseeches his God "to break, blow, burn, and make [him] new" (CEP 314), the reader of this reduced poem is beseeched by critics to apply a similar violence to make wholeness where only fissures exist.

If we refuse, however, to allow the text to tease us into closure through its tantalizing evocation of the sacred, sanctioned center of Whitman, what becomes of the poem? What happens when the poet wanders in a place of loss, a place without the consoling knowledge that "I am solid and sound,/To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,/All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means" (Leaves 38)? Remember that in Whitman's world it would be possible to get at what the writing means, because the relationship between the signifier and the signified would be stabilized and clearly governed by an overall Transcendental Signified. For Whitman, it was God: "I find letters from God dropt

in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name" (71). As Whitman knew, the key to decoding the writing did not rest in knowing the mind of God--"I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least" (71)--but in knowing the wonder of himself (71). What happens to the "line"--which governs a poem like Leaves of Grass and which stands metonymically for the grammar of the inherited story (once the epic story of a nation and now the personalized song of the self)? "Like Decorations" is a critical poem in that it marks the crossing over from the cipher to "a labyrinth of ciphers" (Derrida, Positions 5),[17] from the coded writing to writing itself, from the monological to the dialogical. Critics have not yet known how to read this poem, because it was written from the other side of "the dumbfoundering abyss" (CP 437).

In "Like Decorations," lyric closure is disturbed by the introduction of the "aberrant." The Latin root of the word is "ab," meaning "from," and "errare," meaning "to wander." It marks the moment of wandering or straying from the right or usual course; in short, the poem strays from the traditional, logocentric line into the grammatological play of language. Rather than present a self-enclosed lyric monologue/meditation on death, "Like Decorations" complicates the pure lyric voice by virtue of its language, which drifts into other, dissenting voices. The very notion of wandering, itself, explodes the lyrical self into a whole web of "other" wandering poet-figures. The result is that the poem's language resonates with difference: the monologic lyric voice breaks into polyphonic discourse. By examining a few of the "voices" which penetrate and decentralize the lyrical meditation, we can see that these voices reveal a distinct forking of two irreconcilable paths.

Stevens' contemporary, William Carlos Williams, devotes an entire section of Paterson to walking/wandering in a park on a Sunday. Although he appears to deal candidly with the "fact" that "Divorce is/ the sign of knowledge in our time" (18), his poem is rich with tropes that enforce a metaphysics of presence. Repeatedly Williams emphasizes the pleasure of "aimlessly/wandering" (55), but that pleasure is always set against difference, divorce, a worn out language, as well as the poet's own sense of exile from "the amnesic crowd" (60). What Williams does with difference is what determines the path he takes at the forking of ways. Notice how he heals over difference and interprets the two girls in the park as a synthesized unity:

> Two--
> disparate among the pouring
> waters of their hair in which nothing is
> molten--
>
> two, bound by an instinct to be the same:
> ribbons, cut from a piece,
> cerise pink, binding their hair: one-- (19).

Again, the poet-figure is depicted logocentrically as the "one voice" (54) that can articulate and synthesize the plurality of the "many":

> Voices!
> multiple and inarticulate . voices
> .....
>
> --among which the ear strains to catch
> the movement of one voice among the rest
> --a reed-like voice
> of particular accent
>
> Thus she finds what peace there is, reclines,
> before his approach... (54)

The voice of the man Paterson is, simultaneously, the voice of the place Paterson.[18] Pure lyrical self-identity is the governing notion of the poem; hence, a monologic,

logocentric voice stifles true difference or pluralism and radical dialogism.

Williams does attempt to impress upon us, and himself, his radical modernity (and, hence, the alien land he inhabits). Consequently, he claims that

> I am not a robin nor erudite,
> no Erasmus nor bird that returns to the same
> ground year by year. Or if I am..
> the ground has undergone
> a subtle transformation, its identity altered. (19)

Yet the identity of the ground upon which Williams/Paterson wanders has not been altered. What "transformations" the ground has undergone are only superficial--Stevens would probably say "typographical"--for it is still a most recognizable ground, replete with a knowable center and dominated by the logocentric assumptions of "presence" and the "line."

Paterson is a poem which looks different, composed as it is of poetry and prose, as well as bizarre typographical "queerness," to use Stevens' word (L 326), but these devices are only "inventions" (50), which add a newness to the old line. "Without invention nothing is well spaced, unless the mind change," writes Williams (50). Furthermore, he adds that "unless there is/a new mind there cannot be a new/line, the old will go on/repeating itself with recurring deadness" (50). His aim is to make things new or to defamiliarize things, in a fashion akin to Ezra Pound. Yet this task does not necessarily imply the demolition of the "line" and its attendant logocentric assumptions. Williams' plea for "invention" is, therefore, intimately connected with the idea of revitalizing "the line" once again:

> ...without invention the line
> will never again take on its ancient
> divisions when the word, a supple word,
> lived in it, crumbled now to chalk. (50)

The desire to return to an ancient time when the word (the Logos?) had life and

energy, before it became fixed and dead, is indicative of Williams' nostalgia to return to the archē, the point of pure origin, a time which existed prior to the fall into the broken, modern era, which is as dry as chalk dust from over-familiarity and over-repetition. For Williams, "the line" is the literal composition of metrical feet, but also the metaphysical assumptions of the inherited story with its Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end, together with its onto-theological privileging of the archē, the télos, and the self.[19]

A. R. Ammons walks the same path that Williams walked. Like the even earlier wanderer Odysseus, Ammons claims in Tape for the Turn of the Year that "My story is how/a man comes home/From haunted/lands and transformations:" (9). Williams' desire to sustain "the line," the fixed ground and its grammar in the inherited story, is repeated in Ammons' notion of "returning home" and achieving "restoration," even though it "takes many forms & meanings" (10) in the process. The télos, which curiously returns to the archē (like Williams' snake with its tail in its mouth), will be that moment of the revelation of "meaning" and the covering over of all earlier, accidental wandering off the path. The glossing over of difference in Ammons' poetics is possible because "beside the terror-ridden/homeless man/wandering through/a universe of horror/dwells/the man at ease/in a universe/of light:" (155). His dependence on the line is also evidenced in the structural format of the poem, which is almost tyrannically boundaried on both sides due to the physically restricting adding-machine tape on which he composes. The trope of the line takes on a fleshiness: the poem "doesn't unwind/into sequence" (9), but it cannot help but grow segment by segment "like a tapeworm" (10).

Linearity, the clearly privileged term in a dualism (homeless/at home, dark/light, wandering/at ease), and the ultimate revelation of truth at the télos are operational in Tape because the poem is firmly rivetted on the ground of a transcendental signified. That "we can't come/to the whole truth:" (184) is far from incapacitating to the modern questor. While one may wander around the periphery and seem to be circling pointlessly at times, one's movements are always controlled by the existence of the axis at the circle's center. This center is part of the circle but always outside of the structure.

> somewhere, far off,
> things come together,
> hope rising from and
> moderating strength:
> somewhere, far off,
> there's no expense to the
> part
> in the whole:
> somewhere
> the ideal, the abstraction,
> takes on flesh: (Tape 184)

The taking on of flesh--the Christian incarnation--is the promise that makes the mystery of existence, which is to live among the fragmentary parts, somehow survivable.

Who then walks the other path--the path of radical alterity, true homelessness, irreconcilable divorce between the signifier and the signified? Perhaps one of the best examples is none other than the truly diabolic and heroic Ahasuerus, in canto VII of Shelley's Queen Mab. Only Ahasuerus willfully chooses to wander freely in error in a universe of horror rather than be suffocated by the closed, monologic power of God. In terms reminiscent of his precursor father, Milton's Satan, he cries out,

> But my soul,
> From sight and sense of the polluting woe
> Of tyranny, had long learned to prefer
> Hell's freedom to the servitude of Heaven.
> Therefore I rose, and dauntlessly began
> My lonely and unending pilgrimage
> Resolved to wage unweariable war
> With my almighty Tyrant. (PW 192-99).

With Promethean endurance, Ahasuerus insists upon radical alterity, that which can never be synthesized into a totality, with a "stubborn and unalterable will" (258). This figure, "this phantasmal portraiture/Of wandering human thought" (274-275), is the true precursor of Stevens' "Like Decorations" poem. Only with Ahasuerus is there complete recognition of the fact that synthesis, reconciliation, and a moment of revelation are impossibilities from the moment that one decentralizes the long unchallenged authority and "tyrannous omnipotence" (93) of God. Only Ahasuerus truly accepts life without any recourse to a transcendental signified, which is safely beyond play and which can stabilize all dualisms (good/evil, heaven/hell, freedom/servitude) from disconcerting slippage and blurring. Only Ahasuerus embraces radical wandering without any consoling justification: "thou shalt wander o'er the unquiet earth/Eternally" (182-183) and, so, "Thus have I stood,--through a wild waste of years" (254).

As a quintessential romantic figure, Ahasuerus gloats over his self-sufficiency. His identity, his otherness, is defined against the might and vengefulness of God. Against God's mad blood-letting, Ahasuerus stands "peaceful, and serene, and self-enshrined" (256). It is on this point that Stevens' poem vacillates, and his text becomes undecidable. On the one hand, we know that Stevens' prose and letters repeatedly identify the poet's ego or personality as being at the bottom of what the poet does (L 305). Consequently, he believed that "in

the case of a long thing, one goes ahead under the impetus of a single subject" (L 647), because "it is much easier to make progress on a single long poem, [since] one goes ahead pretty much as one talks, as one thing leads to another" (L 648). It is not surprising then that Litz would argue that "Beginning with 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery' and 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', Stevens began to construct long poems which, like Henry James' house of fiction, have a commanding center which controls a multiplicity of related points of view" (IV 287). Ezra Pound, himself, sanctioned this mode of thinking/reading in his ABC of Reading when he wrote that "Good writing is coterminous with the writer's thought, it has the form of thought, the form of the way the man feels his thought" (113).

On the other hand, we must ask that if there is a direct line from the poet's mind to the text he writes, then can we take a volte-face and translate the text back to a single voice, a single thinking mind, which is peaceful, serene, and self-enshrined?[20] Is there any solid consciousness, which we have the power to reconstitute, lying below the fractured surface of this poem? Is it possible that the exhausted "I," who speaks in indirect discourse in the second stanza, is the holy center that will provide homogeneity to this seriously cleft writing? Then, if the poem contains such a self-enclosed lyrical "I," why did Stevens feel so compelled to translate the meaning of his poems, while at the same time to stress that the critic is "under obligation to base his remarks on what he has before him. It is not a question of what an author meant to say but of what he has said" (L 346)? How is it even conceivable for the critic to read "altogether contrary to the intentions of the author" (L 346), if the line back to this voice is his life-line?

The undecidability of "Like Decorations" stems from this forking of paths: lyric autotelism in the midst of the disseminating play that is language; homogeneity threatened by heterogeneity; the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality; desire for the center countered by the very unlocatability of any such ground. This forking is witnessed in the opening lines of the poem. The passing autumn sun is imaged as Whitman walking along the shore. Stevens' opening image evokes the closing image of Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,/I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags" (73). Whitman's closing riddle is, similarly, heard in the Whitmanian voice that is presented in indirect discourse in Stevens' poem:

> Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
> Missing me one place search another,
> I stop somewhere waiting for you. (Leaves 73)

and

> Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the end.
> His beard is of fire and his staff is a leaping flame. (CP 150)

It appears that Stevens' poem continues "the line" of poetic inheritance and, as a result, realigns his poem with the lyrical, monological tradition first established by his romantic forefathers. In fact, he posits this linearity as the ideal in section forty:

> Always the standard repertoire in line
> And that would be perfection, if each began
> Not by beginning but at the last man's end.
>
> (CP 156)

But is "Like Decorations" solely "the standard repertoire," a mere repetition? Frank Doggett reads this tercet, in Stevens' Poetry of Thought, as a commentary on Stevens' notion of time as recurrence as opposed to development (62), and he has a

great deal invested in erasing the boredom and frustration that ekes out tonally in section forty. Repetition or "recurrence" is critical because Doggett links it to self-identity: "One could not know oneself from moment to moment if there were no persistent elements in one's world" (62).[21] In short, Stevens cannot be known without first knowing "the symmetry of a leaden mate" (CP 152)--the fixed image of Whitman.[22]

Yet we are unable to make of this link an entire chain. We cannot depart from stanza one with a sense of safety and certainty that the remainder of the poem is to be read as part of the "standard repertoire." The opening heliotrope turns on a pun. Stevens is either the son who obediently picks up where his father left off or else he is the "passing" or "runaway" son/sun. As the latter, Stevens could be seen as Whitman's star pupil:

> I am the teacher of athletes,
> .....
> He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.
>
> The boy I love, the same becomes a man not through derived power, but in his own right,
> Wicked rather than virtuous out of conformity or fear.
>
> (Leaves 69)

In response to Whitman's call to dissent, Stevens introduces the "aberrant" or "eccentric" and, in doing so, he destroys the father-teacher. Stevens' naming of the eccentric (from the Greek ekkentros: ek meaning "out" or "away" and kentron meaning "center") brings into play the unassimilable, the deviant, or that which departs or differs from the norm. The text participates both in "the ocean of the virtuosi," as established by the lyric tradition, and in "the ugly alien" (CP 156) or "the meaningless" (CP 153), as established by the destruction of the ground on

which that tradition rests. Seemingly pointing to a single signified safely outside the text, a center of consciousness, the text actually splinters into other voices from other written texts.

There is a crossing or forking of pathways here that can neither be reduced back to a single voice nor synthesized into a formulatable homogeneous monologue. It cannot reach closure with arrival at a final signified, because the poem defers any such arrival with an endless flood of signifiers. Poetry of the aberrational is poetry whose "Music is not written but is to be" (CP 158); as a result, it is a poetry of continual deferral, because it cannot be fixed into a system, equation, or formulation.[23] It is a poetry of the line, and yet of the line with "a nerve, a fold, an angle that interrupts totalization" so that the text becomes "a place of well-determined form, [wherein] no series of semantic valences can any longer be closed or reassembled" (Derrida, Positions 46). This place--a site of language--may be governed by a "design" with a "base," but that "base" (now a concept in need of quotation marks) is the "eccentric." The "base" is a non-base and the "center" a nonlocus, because they are always just somewhere other than, or outside of, where we thought them to be.

We can begin now to understand the long poem as the opposite of lyric closure and homogenization or, more directly, to understand it as narrative in a non-traditional way. "Like Decorations" presents us with a series of beginnings and multiple discourses that do not make a single story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. As we read we may wait for some critical moment or discovery that marks our arrival at meaning, but where in the poem is this moment of knowledge revealed to us? For Litz, the thematic center of the poem is the structural center,

for here Stevens addresses his concern for a revitalized romanticism (IV 183). He makes of the poem a piece of classical architecture: "the middle dome./The temple of the altar where each man/Beheld the truth and knew it to be true," as Stevens writes in "Owl's Clover" (CP 54). Section twenty-five provides a ground for Litz because he knows that this issue was strongly re-iterated in the principal lyric pieces of the Ideas of Order volume, especially "Sailing After Lunch" and "Farewell to Florida." Yet Harold Bloom argues that the "central formulation," which he qualifies by adding "if there is one," appears in section twelve, wherein Stevens presents the figure of Ananke whose serpentine nature evokes the seasonal cycle (PC 107). We could go on, but the result would not be one of consensus. Our experience of journeying through the poem, a journey marked step by step with numerical accuracy, does not bring us toward any specific goal (discovery of self, meaning, truth). There is no reward at the end that justifies the troubling wandering along the way. The truncated bits of story that we encounter are the only story we get and, while it may not be "story" as we have been trained by tradition to expect, it is narrative.

J. Hillis Miller defines narrative as "the allegorizing along a temporal line of this perpetual displacement from immediacy" ("Ariadne's Thread" 72). The narrative line is anything but straightforward for Miller because it is the tracking of the "impossible search for the center of the maze, the Minotaur or spider which has created and so commands it all" (72). It is impossible to complete the search successfully because language itself is etymologically forked, and so it leads us not from sign to thing but from sign to sign in a continual mise en abyme. "No thread," writes Miller, "can be followed to a central point where it provides a means

of overseeing, controlling, and understanding the whole. Instead it reaches, sooner or later, a crossroad, a blunt fork, where either path leads manifestly to a blank wall" (72).

In addition to Miller's notion of narrative and language, I would add Bakhtin's notion of the dialogistic nature of language, a theory which militates against the possibility of any language being purely monological and self-enclosed.[24] For Bakhtin, the uttered word

> directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile. (The Dialogic Imagination 276)

The word exists in "an environment full of alien words" (277) and, therefore, participates in a context that is always already situated within narratives--political, historical, literary, biographical, psychoanalytical, and so forth. A narrative knows itself only by responding to other, counter narratives or, in short, only in the play of difference. The novel in Bakhtin's eyes, and by extension this "novelized" long poem in my reading, is "dialogic (and not 'poetic') only inasmuch as it is not dialectical (it is not antidialectical either), only as it resists the temptation to reduce the alterity of the other to the identity of the same" (Carroll, "The Alterity of Discourse" 79). In this manner Bakhtin's theories set out to subvert any meta-narrative, any totalitarian system, and any authoritarian structure.

The privileged linearity of the narrative structure is challenged, dismantled, and reconstituted with a "fold" in "Like Decorations." As the poem unfolds, it repeatedly refolds and, thereby, refuses to settle into any comfortable pattern. So,

living as we do in "a world of universal poverty" (CP 152), we must proceed without "the rules of the rabbis," those "Happy men" who are capable of "distinguishing frost and clouds" (CP 151). These priestly men, like "the philosophers alone [who] will be fat/Against the autumn winds" (CP 152), serve an identical function: they declare that the truth is and that they know the route there. Their monologic, authoritarian discourse functions by suppressing difference in their larger power to create dialectical synthesis: "Under the mat of frost and over the mat of clouds./But in between lies the sphere of my fortune/And the fortunes of frost and of clouds" (CP 151). The strength of their monologic discourse also hinges upon their refusal to submit to radical alterity, the dialogic resistance of differing voices, and the incessant change that is evoked metaphorically in the autumn winds.

Countering these authoritarian figures, the figure of "the mask that speaks/Things unintelligible, yet understood" (CP 156) pops up briefly in section thirty-nine. This figure destabilizes and subverts their monologic priestly claims to meaning and truth. The appearance of the mask throws into question the issue of who is speaking; it creates yet another fold or wrinkle in the line back to the central consciousness, making it that much more impossible ever to retrieve. The mask that hides identity and disfigures the origin of voice and presence is radically threatening to the revered theological work of the rabbi and the philosopher.

In David Carroll's article, "The Alterity of Discourse: Form, History, and the Question of the Political in M. M. Bakhtin," he discusses Bakhtin's notion of the ventriloquists's dummy as expressive of dialogism,[25] and I quote him here at some length, because this figure has strongly influenced my own thinking on the mask:

> If the ventriloquist's dummies do not have the first or the last word (neither does the author-ventriloquist), they continually transform, interrupt, and redirect the intentions and words of the ventriloquist; and as we know from watching accomplished ventriloquists work, their art is in the way they lose their own voice in other voices, the way their voice is continually thrown or disseminated outside of itself from the start. The true ventriloquist continually risks losing his power and mastery over all his voices, even 'his own', for his 'true voice' and the message it is supposed to convey cannot be separated from the dialogue created among his various and conflicting voices...The intentions of the ventriloquist himself cannot be given a special status outside and preceding the dialogue of voices, where the ventriloquist himself must be seen as ventriloquated as much as ventriloquating. (73-74)

The mask brings into play the dialogistic conflict between the lyric norm and the textuality of voice that is always already perforated with another, alien context so that it "speaks/Things unintelligible" (CP 156). The mask posits a ground in the singular Ptolemaic world of the self, but it cannot be located or determined with confidence, any more than the origin of the Picts can be retraced along their genealogical line (CP 155). Both the attempt to find the true voice of the mask and the true origin of the Picts is subverted from the start. Their function in the poem is just that--to subvert any claim to an original voice, which is perfectly integrated, authoritarian, theologically sanctioned, and monological. They point to the incurable wound that cannot be healed into a homogeneous surface; again, they are the tears in the text(ile) that cannot be closed.

The destabilizing effect of "the aberrant," the "eccentric," and the "mask" throws the text into a state of endless deferral and continual beginnings again. The narrative line cannot move toward a climactic moment of knowledge because it is repeatedly caught on textual snags that refuse to be tucked discretely back into the fabric of the text.

One of these snags is a narrative which tells no one story but an arbitrary

number and arrangement of narrative snippets, that are presented like so many frames of celluloid excised from different films each of which, we might assume, tells its own story independently of the other, even though we never see it in full. Section nineteen tells of the beginning of a drama in language that echoes the cold drama depicted on Keats' urn. As with Keats' frozen lovers here, too, desire is halted. In Stevens' poem it is not death but, again, the arbitrary imposition of aesthetic form that itself demands the fragmenting of narrative into acts and scenes:

> An opening of portals when night ends,
> A running forward, arms stretched out as drilled.
> Act I, Scene I, at a German Staats-Oper. (CP 153)

But where does this fragment take us, being as it is just one more beginning again in a poem that cannot get beyond beginnings, like a stutterer who cannot get beyond the initial consonant? Beginnings of plays that go nowhere or beginnings of days that are crippled from the outset, the narrative remains snagged and fails to lead us to a moment of comprehension:

> The sun of Asia creeps above the horizon
> Into this haggard and tenuous air,
> A tiger lamed by nothingness and frost. (CP 153)

Even when beginning at beginnings cannot help the poem get past the narrative fragment into a story of sorts, Stevens resorts to beginning by telling the ending first, as in section forty-nine:

> It needed the heavy nights of drenching weather
> To make him return to people, to find among them
> Whatever it was that he found in their absence,
> A pleasure, an indulgence, an infatuation.
>
> (CP 158)

At other times, we seem to be plunged into the climatic midpoint of some dramatic soliloquy:

> Shall I grapple with my destroyers
> In the muscular poses of the museums?
> But my destroyers avoid the museums.
>
> (CP 153)

Reading with a sense of narrative propulsion,[26] the reader wanders from fragment to fragment but without reward.

The poem is, in my reading, a narrative because it evokes and sets into conflict a series of voices, none of which is privileged as the dogmatic utterance capable of grounding and granting meaning to all the other, alien voices. It is not only that the poem incorporates narrative elements while remaining principally lyrical, which is the standard interpretation of long poems, but that it is a narrative because the lyric voice is one voice set in a context of alterity. The lyric voice is woven into a complex fabric that it can no longer control, balance, or organize. Borrowing a Derridean metaphor, we could say that it is no longer the central link in the chain but that its "discourse and its order (essence, sense, truth, meaning, consciousness, ideality, etc.) are overflowed, that is, everywhere that [its] authority is put back into the position of a mark in a chain that this authority intrinsically and illusorily believes it wishes to, and does in fact, govern" (Positions 59-60). We know only too well how Stevens privileged the temperament, personality, or ego of the poet, and how he wrote "Like Decorations" "walking to & from the office" (L 333). We also know how exciting (in a dramatic and certainly sensual way) Stevens thought "a man in his thoughts" was (L 306). Stevens believed that authority lay in this presiding consciousness which, there being nothing else, lay at the heart of what the poet wrote.

As the narrative unfolds, the reader finds him or herself wandering, perhaps waiting for a place to rest in confidence, and yet finds no solid ground where the

consolations of meaning and truth are won. In this textual place of loss, one figure is endlessly substituted for another (Whitman to exhausted poet to the eccentric to rules of rabbis...); one sign is replaced by another in an endless mise en abyme ("the clanking mechanism/Of machine within machine within machine," [CP 157]); signifiers do not point outward to signifieds but spiral back into the text and to an endless dissemination of more signifiers (note the heliotropic sun that seeks not the surfaces of ponds but "must create its colors out of itself," [CP 158]); and, finally, narrative promises of endings are made ("Music is not yet written but is to be," [CP 158]) and yet are continually deferred. Stevens' belief that a monologic discourse--the lyric cogito--governed the poem is a belief adopted by most critics, usually out of respect for the author himself. But to read the poem ethically, to use Miller's term, is to recognize that "This fat pistache of Belgian grapes exceeds/The total gala of auburn aureoles" (CP 154). Capturing the conflict between the foreign, alien grapes and the body enfolded in a scared radiance or halo, this line enacts the conflict between the theologically-sanctioned center and the dissemination of voices into dialogism, which overflows/exceeds the power of the monological to govern, and so limit, play in the text.

The conflict is irresolvable. The foreign elements prevent any one voice from achieving an authoritarian stance and, thereby, also prevent the poem from closure and the resolution of a traditional narrative ending. But, there is also always the existence of the purple bird, whose repeatable notes of comfort are exemplary of the lyrical I (CP 155). His unified, monological voice, which being repeatable is thus traceable and knowable, is continually fighting back against the power of those foreign, dialogical elements bent upon forcing it out of its self-

induced and self-perpetuated isolation "of being rare" and into a context of other conflicting voices that refuse to be sung into servitude.

The poem also presents syntactical snags. Notice section twenty-seven, which reads

> John Constable they could never quite transplant
> And our streams rejected the dim Academy.
> Granted the Picts impressed us otherwise
> In the taste for iron dogs and iron deer.
>
> (CP 154-155)

The conjunction "and" promises a bridge between two thoughts, but here the ligature fails. The "and" simultaneously makes a promise and breaks it, failing as it does to bind two irreconcilable thoughts. Seemingly promising unity, the conjunction as ligature actually serves to mask discontinuity. Again and again in this poem we feel that, perhaps where the last line failed us, the next one will lead us more directly toward meaning.[27] That moment of clarity is, however, frustrated by the addition of each new line.

The entire narrative becomes one long anacoluthon, which means, in Greek, "wanting sequence." The Oxford Companion to English Literature (1985) defines this figure of disarrangement as "a sentence in which a fresh construction is adopted before the former is complete" (25). The narrative stutters because each line is, itself. fragmented. Rather than being led to meaning, we repeatedly encounter the poem collapsing in on itself again and again, even at the grammatical/syntactical level. We are left with a plethora of constructions in collision with one another: they all mark beginnings, but they collapse before they can successfully conclude their points. Note, by way of example, section thirty-one:

> A teeming millpond or a furious mind.
> Gray grasses rolling windily away

And bristling thorn-trees spinning on the bank.
The actual is a deft beneficence. (CP 155)

The opening line presents subjects which are, supposedly, analogous or interchangeable, but then leaves them dangling and devoid of a verb to unite them. After this dead end, we encounter lines two and three which form a unit, being an end-stopped line, but again we have two subjects, now qualified by participles, yet they still lack an active verb. We can begin to see how the absence of verbs frustrates the narrative line.[28] By the third line we finally have a complete sentence, at least grammatically so. But, again, lines one and two are not reconciled by the "deft beneficence" (CP 155) of the third line. The stanza presents a three part syllogistic form, which may lead the reader to expect or, more aggressively, to make meaning, but it refuses to comply grammatically. No common term is presented between the major and minor premise and, hence, the poem fails to furnish us with a logical connection, which would enable us to comprehend the third proposition and thereby reach a conclusion.

Reading forward--line by line and section by section-- we actually proceed nowhere lacking, as we do, verbs to push us onward. Each new line is a beginning again, an anacoluthon, a failure of grammar:

The album of Corot is premature.
A little later when the sky is black.
Mist that is golden is not wholly mist. (CP 157)

Rhetorical arguments collapse similarly. In section sixteen, we read:

If thinking could be blown away
Yet this remain the dwelling-place
Of those with a sense for simple space. (CP 153)

The construction begins with the hypothetical "if," which it qualifies with the conjunction "yet," but fails to lead us to the conclusory "then": "if"..., "yet"...,

"then"--what? The structure is left to dangle. Lastly, as one long anacoluthon, this poem shifts from one speaker to the next in a most arbitrary fashion: "me" (II), "one" (III), "my" (IV), "us" (V), "we" (VI), and so forth.

Rather than accept the radical eccentricity of this poem--its unresolvable center, its nonlocus--Vendler claims that "the extreme variation of speakers makes us, in defense, assume a single sensibility 'behind' the scene, a puppet master of whom we can say that he is a man revolving thoughts on middle age, death, and the compensations of creation" (OEW 69, emphasis mine). Vendler called this imposition of a thematic statement a "natural tendency" (69), for only then can one "look for consistency of some kind in such a welter of styles" (69). For the reader, however, "Not to die a parish death" (CP 151) is to read for difference, to face the welter that constitutes this place of loss, and to embrace the dialogical rather than bow to the omnipotence of the monological that will "create its colors out of itself" (CP 158) like Hoon.

III. "Owl's Clover": Wandering in "Concentric Bosh"

The conflict between the monological voice and the dialogical is more fully dramatized and foregrounded in "Owl's Clover" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar." The opening proclamation of Georg Lukács' The Theory of the Novel stirs nostalgically in the memory, for in these two poems Stevens attempts to be a man at home, a native in his world (CP 180), or, as Whitman would say, "the poet of comrades" (Leaves 14). Of such "integrated civilizations," Lukács writes,

> Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths--ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars...The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another, for fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light...having

> become itself, [the soul] finds a centre of its own and draws a closed circumference round itself (29).[29]

Nostalgic for a metaphysical sense of being at home, or to be again "as Danes in Denmark all day long" (CP 419), Stevens attempts in "Owl's Clover" and "Blue Guitar" "to dip aspects of the contemporaneous in the poetic" (L 314). But did Stevens produce just "a lot of Easter eggs" (L 314)--little, intricately patterned bauble-like objects without function except to bring pleasure to the eye/I?

As the poems of "Owl's Clover" make evident, the attempt to merge the lyrical I with the multivocality of "reality" in the contemporaneous world is a considerably more violent act than Stevens' Easter egg metaphor implies. The same ease that the verb "to dip" carries with it is witnessed in Stevens' 1942 essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," when he says, "It is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (NA 27). Ease becomes violence, however, because the reality we live in is "an ever-enlarging incoherence" (NA 17). Recall Stevens' famous dictum: "It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36). Nothing less than "Self-preservation" itself, writes Stevens, rests on this sustained violence (NA 36). Stevens' preoccupation with violence is vented in section seven of "The Irrational Element in Poetry," which he wrote at the same time as "Owl's Clover." Given that the "stage-setting...has been taken down and trucked away" (OP 224), (the old setting is that starry backdrop Lukács describes so well), we find ourselves standing at "an uncertain present [looking] toward a more uncertain future" (OP 225). In order "to collect oneself against all this in poetry," one must "resist": "Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an

explicable, an amenable circumstance" (OP 225).[30]

Stevens' resolution of violence into calming tropes of dipping, interdependence, transaction, and conversion is adopted by critics. Hence, Rajeev Patke writes,

> For 'Owl's Clover' Stevens did not return to the expedient of a temporally ordered narrative. The contingencies of his work schedule (see L 291) may have necessitated a process in which fragments were gradually accreted into a whole, or a long poem was formed by arranging a set of related but virtually independent poems into a sequence (LP 41).

But one need only read the opening chapter of Rosenthal and Gall's The Modern Poetic Sequence (1983) to realize that, by willing to believe that a poem forms an organic structure, they "discover" that the poem does, indeed, do exactly as they expected. They write in parenthesis, "(We of course assume the work of a real poet, by which we mean someone superbly gifted in creating affects and building them into an organic structure)" (15). On the basis of this ground, the poet can "give the multiple aspects of his poem full play and yet provide a self-contained form, prismatically unified" (221). They, like Patke, are blind to the radically contradictory nature of their claim for the existence of "full play" within a "self-contained form" grounded on a center of consciousness.

It is also worth noting briefly that Patke rejects a poem like "Owl's Clover" for a reason similar to Rosenthal and Gall's rejection of Whitman's "Calamus" and "Drum-Taps." "The public stance," write Rosenthal and Gall, "to some extent displaces and distorts the subjective and confessional genius of the sequence" (44). Patke is disturbed by Stevens' politics because they are not transparent in the poem. This ambiguity interrupts the poem's main subject--the self. Why else would Patke make much of the political issues in "The Greenest Continent," wherein Stevens

broaches the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia by the European fascists? With respect to the garbled politics, he writes, "it does not indicate which side [Stevens] is on himself, nor whether the irony of the poem is being deployed against the Italians or whether it is simply an attempt at deflecting indecision by a display of verbal pyrotechnics" (63). Patke's desire for a mooring, a ground in the self which will grant the language a transparency and a stable meaning, is rooted in the same assumption that Joseph Riddel spoke of bluntly in 1965: "Politics is Stevens' ostensible subject [in "Owl's Clover"], but the self remains his true source of authority" (CE 122). The phenomenological critics seek, again and again, the voice of the speaking poet, who will be our Virgil guiding us through the abyss of language.

Unable to accept radical alterity, Helen Vendler similarly suppresses otherness by reducing all conflicting voices in "Owl's Clover" to the singular voice of Stevens, himself. The emergence of actors in this long poem fails to make to a dramatic piece. The Bulgar, Basilewsky, and the diplomats are merely "convenient means of dramatic dissociation for Stevens," writes Vendler (100).[31] Lacking "fictional energy," they "[dissolve] very quickly into Stevens' own voice" (100). Just as Vendler felt that "the narrative process was deeply uncongenial to his mind" (54), so, too, does she argue that his talent was never for the dramatic (100). Perhaps Harold Bloom sums up the traditional reading of Stevens best: "Owl's Clover" was Stevens' "worst performance" (117), and the error he wandered into was "forgetting again the Whitmanian lesson of Hoon and of the woman at Key West, which was 'Chant to yourself in solitude'" (PC 119).

Rather than lock Stevens into a rigid line of transmission from one lyric singer to another, only to castigate his work when it refuses to comply with this pre-determined system, perhaps it is best to examine how this text defies formalistic closure by its continual deferral of an invariable, autonomous presence. More than any other poem, "Owl's Clover" presents multiple voices, which are crossed and recrossed, interrupted and clipped short, by the lyric voice. No one voice can be comprehended in isolation, but only in conflict with a distinctly other voice that it cannot reduce to self-identity. As one reads through the narrative sequentially, one encounters an onslaught of voice/figures which emerge and dissolve in an endlessly disseminative manner. One figure supplementing another, one presence adding itself to an existent absence, in a "play of substitution [that] fills and marks a determined lack" (Derrida, OG 157): monological mind of the old woman; sculptor's artistic conception; Marxist voice (behind which sounds Mr. Burnshaw's voice and his review of Stevens in New Masses);[32] the poet's voice; a solemn voice; a speaker, probably the poet; a Bulgarian's voice; poet's voice, comparing the pioneer to the suburban man of the present; Basilewsky's voice; a speaker evoking a subman and a Portent. We could carefully mark off boundary lines between one voice and the next by page and line, but the effect of reading the poem is that one voice so quickly supplements and supplants the other that they slip and slide into one another. We wander from one figure to the next, but to what avail? Where is the one presence that exists outside of this play and that holds the truth to what this poem is "really" about?

In order to make sense of this onslaught of conflicting voices, Patke settles the semantic instability of the poem by forcing it onto a monological, metaphysical

grid. The still center is, for him, the statue, around which exist four concentrically expanding circles: the individual and the poor, to society and the proletariat, to nations and the tropical, to a culminative vision of the human race and the portentous (58). How still is this center, however? Remember that the poem itself asks whether "In an age of concentric mobs would any sphere/ Escape all deformation" (OP 63)? Wanting to tighten and close the circles into a singular monological voice, Patke attempts to escape from all deviation or "deformation." His application of a linear, télos-oriented "reason" is most interesting, but we must ask, "if reason, fatuous fire,/Is only another egoist wearing a mask" (OP 63)? What if the poem leads us into endless wandering in "Concentric bosh" (OP 56); in short, we may find that it leads us in circles, the common center of which is empty words or nonsense, a foreignness,[33] the aberrant.

In "The Old Woman and the Statue," for example, the text vacillates undecidedly between her and the particular narrative context evoked by her presence (an historical, economical, and psychological narrative) and the sculptor, replete with his distinctly "other" context (a different history, economy, psychology, and class). This conflict between contexts that are pregnant with their own narratives and language is what makes of this poem a true narrative in an ongoing narrative. The woman's "certain solitude" is so powerful that it erases difference in her world and asserts a monological authority in its place:

> A mood that had become so fixed it was
> A manner of the mind, a mind in a night
> That was whatever the mind might make of it,
> A night that was that mind so magnified
> It lost the common shape in a world of shapes. (OP 45)

But, at the same time, her completeness or fullness is exposed to be actually an absence, a bodilessness, a "bitter mind/In a flapping coat" (OP 44), but he is not the cause or origin of her existence. We know her presence to be an absence because she is supplemented to by the presence of the sculptor and his aesthetic as bodied forth in the marble horses. The sculptor seems to precede her, since he could not foresee her (OP 44), but he is not the cause or origin of her existence. Yet, it appears that since she now exists (although only ethereally as " a fear too naked for her shadow's shape," 44), it is almost impossible to imagine the world in her absence, a world of the future (conditional tense is used to imagine the not-yet) which is really more like the past (a time "before" the voice of the poor and the wind were one, 45). The contextual lines of these two figures twist and intersect in continual conflict. Knowledge of the sculptor must take place in dialogue with "this atmosphere in which her musty mind/Lay black and full of black misshapen" (OP 44). Her blackness is knowable not in isolation but only in dialogue with the sculpted "marbled leaping in the storms of light" (OP 43). There is no dialectical resolution or synthesis; there is only "the black of what she thought" in dialogue with "the moving colors" of the sculptor's artistic conception (OP 44).

In this dialogism, which breaks out of lyric enclosure, we recognize that otherness cannot be reduced to the ideality of the same. The desire to reduce the aberrant or alien to a single, knowable thing has haunted critics. Patke and Vendler see the poem as evoking a "Berkeleyan universe" where "things exist only if the beholder sees them" (Patke, LP 51). The union of the woman's mind with the night makes of her mind "the sovereign shape" in a "sterile relationship" with Nature (OEW 105), in a perverse echo of Shelley's desire to be one with Nature.

Litz similarly resolves difference into homogeneous unity, for he claims that, although the two forces exist in "interaction or interrelation" (209) and although there is no "resolution" offered, the poem heals over difference through its "own form and harmonies" (IV 211) in a larger order.

The poem breaks into two sustained and irreconcilable paths: lyric/ narrative, monologic/dialogic, black/moving colors, fixed/leaping. Difference is not and cannot be synthesized into sameness, a reconstituted, linear path. Consider, momentarily, the end of section three. The poem asks, "What path could lead apart from what she was/And was to be?" (OP 44). Rhetorically, this question is to be met with a negative response; consequently, no path can lead her out of her black, fixed, monological mind, which is necessarily teleologically determined. The poem then presents a hypothetical alternative:

> ...Could it happen to be this,
> This atmosphere in which the horses rose,
> This atmosphere in which her musty mind
> Lay black and full of black misshapen? (OP 44)

This optional path is described by the use of the rhetorical figure of the anaphora. Traditionally understood this figure is used to evoke balance between words, phrases, or clauses which are placed in a position of parallelism or equivalence, due to their (dis)similarity. In this instance, this figure of balance is supposed to stress the equivalence or harmonious balance of difference between the woman and the statue, together with their respective narratives (present/past, poverty/wealth, lower class/bourgeoisie, reality/imagination). Rhetorically, the anaphora posits a homogeneous path--the union of opposites, the overcoming of difference in a larger unity.

At the same time, the figure stresses a failure of addition. The atmosphere

of the woman's black mind is neither added to nor a further qualification of the atmosphere of the bronze horses, for both are knowable only in their unrelenting difference or otherness. In a monological, lyrical tradition, anaphora rhetorically posits a single harmonious path in its compromise between the lady and the horses. But in a dialogical, narrative-oriented reading, the anaphora actually creates a parallelism between two lines which can never intersect: lady's mind and horses. The two "atmospheres"--or "contexts," to use a Bakhtinian term--cannot be, simultaneously, the referents of the single pronoun "this": "Could it be this,/This atmosphere in which the horses rose,/This atmosphere in which her musty mind..." On the one hand, the rhetorical figure makes a homogeneous lyric unity seem possible but, on the other hand, this very figure of balance and equivalence introduces only the heterogeneity of narrative contexts in conflict. The lyrical self (mind, I) is not denounced in this reading, nor is it completely abandoned. Rather, premises of the logocentric, lyrical self enter the discourse at the very moment that they are denounced. At the moment the poem seems to pronounce lyric unity and closure, difference erupts, inescapably.

Finally, this opening poem closes on a note of an ideal unity in a not yet existent future time. By postulating "a smooth domain,/Untroubled by suffering" (OP 46), the poem speaks of an ideal homogeneous realm which is free of radical alterity (woman, poverty, suffering). This ideal moment would be a moment of divine transcendence: a "grinding against the stubborn earth, until/The light wings lifted through the crystal space/Of night" (OP 46). Mention of an ideal unity somewhere outside the chaos (play) of the reality of language is a reminder of the poem's obdurate lyric impulse for resolution, a still point, presence. But this

moment, despite the vivid depiction it receives here, is always, necessarily, deferred.[34] Resolution to the poem is promised, but it is always just somewhere out of reach. At the moment its features are most clearly identified, we recognize that it is not present at all. We know this moment only through what we know it not to be--not the woman's suffering.[35] The moment is never determinately present and is knowable only in terms of what it is not or, more precisely, its differences from the absent woman. Hence, the final line is particularly ironic: "How clearly that [moment] would be defined" (OP 46). This unified, ideal moment is, paradoxically, completely dependent on the difference it seeks to erase by imagining a time "Without her" (OP 45).

As the narrative continues, it becomes apparent that its progress is most regressive. The poem's telling (diegesis) of the statue[36] is always a retelling and a revising, because the changing contexts in which it is found serve to render it an inconstant thing. The statue is, irresolvably, both endlessly decipherable and a fixed museum piece. For the Burnshaw of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," it is merely a "jotting-down of the sculptor's foppishness" (OP 47), and for the "solemn voice" (known only as "not Mr. Burnshaw's" [OP 49]) it is part of "the immense detritus of a world/That is completely waste" (OP 49). Yet for the poetic voice in section seven of the same poem, the statue is interpreted as "vivid" (OP 51). Choreographing the "damsels" in a circle with the statue in the center and behind them, the poet evokes a metaphysical center. But the statue's fixed, vivid presence is, in the process, destroyed: "Conceive that while you dance the statue falls,/ The heads are severed, topple, tumble, tip" (OP 51). As the presence of the statue is reduced to a non-presence, the damsels are to speak in "glassy" and "porcelain"

cries until "glass" is transformed into "the speech of the spirit," until "bell-borrowings become/Implicit clarities," until feelings are changed to sound, until "waterish ditherings" turn to "the tense, the maudlin, true meridian/That is yourselves" (OP 52). This string of transformations ritually leads us from the disfigured statue to the re-figured "damsels" brought down to earth.

Compared to "the elephantine palms" (OP 54) of Africa, the statue would be thin, that is "if the statue were to rise" or if it were possible for it to stand in the godless, southern realm of Africa. In "The Greenest Continent," section six, the questioning voice contemplates whether or not the statue could stand in Africa, when it originated both imaginatively and materially in the cold north. This thing is now riddled with difference from itself, as opposed to being a thing-in-itself:[37] "Could marble still/Be marble after drenching reds, the dark/And drenching crimsons, or endure/" (OP 57). But then, in section seven, for the European diplomats of the cafes with their colonial mentality, "The statue has a form/That will always be and will be everywhere" (OP 58). Despite the lazy expounding of the diplomats on topics which deflate and collapse in the manner of Pope's zeugmas--"Fromage and coffee and cognac and no gods" (OP 57)--they can never really know the statue. Although it stands in Europe "among/The common-places of which it formed a part" (OP 57), it originated in Africa from the "ubiquitous will" of "Fateful Ananke" (OP 59). This figure is here presented as the arché and télos of the statue: "He, only, caused the statue to be made/And he shall fix the place where it will stand" (OP 60).

By section five of "A Duck for Dinner," the statue has taken on a transcendent significance as denoted by its description as "white and high" in the

superlative: "white brillianter/Than the color white and high beyond any height/That rises in the air" (OP 64). Now, for the "sprawlers on the grass," it becomes "the metropolitan of the mind" in which "they feel/The central of the composition, in which/They live. They see and feel themselves" (OP 64). The statue symbolizes what is human in all men by allowing them to see and feel themselves. By the closing poem of "Sombre Figuration," its power is deflated because it becomes recontextualized and relative. Here we are given a crow's perspective of the statue (OP 70) from the trees to counterpoint the view of the masses from the grass. "Crow is realist" (CP 154), we will remember reading in section twenty-five of "Like Decorations." Supposedly we have finally arrived at the statue in "true perspective" (OP 71). But this perspective is already tampered with, since "Crows/ Give only their color to the leaves" (OP 71). The imposition of the crow's blackness is reminiscent of Nietzsche's claim that "Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them" (Will to Power 327). Colouring the leaves with their presence, the crows once again alter the context in which the statue is seen.

The narrative of the statue does not lead up to this final moment, because the final poem fails to offer resolution. It is, as we shall see, yet another moment in the existence of the statue, and all moments are equally provisional. No one moment is exemplary. No one moment halts the play of the text by giving it a fixed and stable center capable of organizing, balancing, and unifying the structure itself. Each time the poem starts up again--and this poem is a series of new beginnings[38]--the statue is something different.

Consider, for instance, the bifurcated origins of the statue, for resolution at the télos often hinges upon a return to the archē. In "The Greenest Continent," we are told that Ananke, "the final god" (OP 59), is the origin and end of the statue. Knowledge of the statue would seem then to hinge upon comprehension of this "Sultan of African sultans" (OP 60). Arrival at the origin is most problematical, however, because, although this figure of Necessity exists everywhere, he is always absent or somewhere other. By extension, although he would be at home everywhere since he is "the common god" (OP 59), he sings the song of the homeless and exiled, "Life's foreigners, pale aliens of the mud" (OP 59). Posited as the origin of the statue, and perhaps a key to settling the play of the statue, this figure stubbornly remains an irreducible exteriority that fissures the text and makes a return to the statue's origin an impossibility. Promising and then deferring arrival at a central point of origin, the poem folds back upon itself and starts over again by offering a different point of origin in "A Duck for Dinner": "The statue is the sculptor not the stone./In this he carved himself, he carved his age" (OP 64). Here the people can look upon the statue and in it "they see and feel themselves, seeing/And feeling the world in which they live" (OP 64). Knowledge of the statue now rests upon knowledge of the sculptor, and the reader's mind quickly reels back to Stevens' prose for confirmation: "The mind of the poet describes itself as constantly in his poems as the mind of the sculptor describes itself in his forms" (NA 46). Retrieval of the sculptor's mind is, however, as frustrated in this poem as is comprehension of Ananke. How, for example, can this sculptor be consistent with the sculptor in "The Old Woman and The Statue"? The sculptor of "A Duck for Dinner" carved his horses in such a manner that "he touched another

race,/Above our race, yet of ourselves transformed" (OP 64); simultaneously, he also created an artwork that was mimetic of himself and his age. His accomplishment is that, as Stevens would say, "he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (NA 31). We know his accomplishment, however, only by its difference from the failure of the sculptor in the "Old Woman" statue poem. This sculptor's horses refuse to be the articulation of their context as the violence of the verbs make evident: "The heads held high and gathered in a ring/At the center of the mass, the haunches low,/Contorted, staggering from the thrust against/The earth as the bodies rose on feathery wings" (OP 43, emphasis mine). The conflict is rooted in the simple fact that "her he had not foreseen" (OP 44). His blindness is the other's insight.[39] So, although we may think that we are getting "progressively" closer to a comprehension of "the sculptor," we are actually being led down divergent paths. The signifier fails to point to a single, self-present, and self-identical signified outside of the play of words. Similarly, while the poem makes gestures of revealing the origin of the statue and, by extension, insight into the statue which motivates the narrative, it actually leaves the reader wandering along split, forked, and clipped paths: Ananke or the sculptor? the one sculptor or the other?

By the fifth poem in the series, "Sombre Figuration," Stevens' poem has not "progressed" so much as regressed even further. Although he claimed in "Lions in Sweden" that he "was once/A hunter of those sovereigns of the soul" (CP 124), he recommences this work "still hanker[ing] after sovereign images" (CP 125). For a critic like Patke, and perhaps for Stevens too, the appearance of the subman

functions like a Greek deus ex machina, which comes seemingly from nowhere and provides the "vital link" (LP 66) to a poem which seems to be falling apart: past/present, rational/irrational, father/ son, outer/inner, extrinsic/intrinsic (66). He explains away the failure of the image of the statue to provide a fixed center to the poem by arguing that the subman is the statue in the mind (64). The portent, being "the form/Of a generation that does not know itself" (OP 68), is by logical extension "the as-yet-unaware consciousness of the collective mass of humanity" (LP 67). In this interpretive gesture, Patke heals over disruptions in the poem and restores the statue to a privileged position of centrality by internalizing it in the mind of common man. Now the statue embraces unity and change, one man and everyman. Having salvaged the unity of the poem, he sees the poem ending with a night-time dismissal as the poet "lulls" himself into preparation for his alternate day self (LP 68). But Patke's reading is an acting out of "an ineluctable nostalgia for presence that makes of this heterogeneity a unity by declaring that a sign brings forth the presence of the signified" (Spivak, OG xvi). If we bring some pressure to bear against the sign of the subman, we will see that it, too, actually marks a place of difference.

That Stevens' poem is rich in the sort of metaphysical language that Patke has adopted is self-evident. The subman is "the cause" (origin) of change and yet he, himself, is singular and constant, Stevens explains in a particularly theological paradox reminiscent of the New Testament God. Similarly, he can be found "under all/The rest" (OP 66), and the metaphysical connotations of the "below" are traditionally embedded. Lastly, he is the archē and the télos, for he is the one "to whom in the end the rest return" (OP 66). The formulaic structure of the text is

that the enlarged counterpart of the subman is the portent, the existence of which we are to believe, even though "All this is hidden from sight" (OP 68), because we know the subman and the subman "beholds" the portent (OP 69). The name for this formula is the "Hegelian Aufhebung," since the subman=the portent. As Spivak explains in her prefatory remarks to Of Grammatology, the Aufhebung is "a relationship between two terms where the second at once annuls the first and lifts it up to a higher sphere of existence; it is a hierarchical concept" (xi). While the subman is "The man below the man below the man," a native as opposed to being "born in another land (OP 66), the portent lies "High up in heaven" (OP 68) "lean[ing]" on its earthly counterpart below. How stable is this leaning, mathematical structure, however? Is it a place of rest at the end of our long journey through "Owl's Clover"? Does it bridge, balance, and resolve the problematics of the poem encountered as we wandered through it? Or, again, do the premises of the logocentric self enter the discourse at the very moment they are cancelled?

As the poem winds its way summatively toward the subman and the portent, we actually fail to arrive at a stable presence.[40] The figure of the subman, itself, is presented as that which is common to all men: "He was born within us as a second self" (OP 67). He is the hidden key, the genealogical link uniting man to his past since he is "A self of parents who have never died,/Whose lives return" (OP 67). Through him the chain of transmission is restored, and the genealogical/historical fissures are healed over, making futurity possible. At the very moment, however, that this logocentric figure asserts itself as the common center at the heart of all change, it simultaneously re-covers its radical foreignness,

its otherness, its strangeness. The "second self" of all men is, we must remember, an "ogre," a monster (OP 67), which is dismembered or "dissembled" (OP 67). This figure echoes back to section six of "A Duck for Dinner," only to point out yet another knot in the poem's attempted rationality.

Stevens' locating and naming of the subman radically contradicts his earlier denigration of "The Johnsonian composition, abstract man" for being an "[evasion]" which "by its repetition" eventually "comes to bear/A meaning without a meaning" (OP 65). This latter dismembered figure only serves to underscore Stevens' disremembering which, in J. Hillis Miller's language, is "his inability to keep a total picture of his condition clearly present in his mind" ("Dismembering and Disremembering" 52). Miller's claims for Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies" are applicable to "Owl's Clover": "His essay forgets in one place what it remembers in another. What it untwists in one place it twists up in another, like a knotted loop that cannot be wholly untangled" (51). After dismissing the myth of a shared ontology, Stevens resurrects it at the last minute as a means of granting meaning to the masses (OP 62), to history (OP 67), and to the place of his poetics in the contemporary world. While the phenomenological reading claims to have located the critical missing middle link, the post-structuralist reading refuses to overlook the ogre, the radical alterity that inhabits and divides the center, and thus knows the center to be a non-center.

This alterity is, itself, the unconscious: "Freud gives it [alterity] a metaphysical name, the unconscious" (Derrida, Speech and Phenomena 151). Derrida explains why the hidden key can unlock nothing or, in other words, why alterity/unconscious can never be consciously grasped or made present:

> In this context and under this heading, the unconscious is not, as we know, a hidden, virtual, and potential self-presence. It is differed--which no doubt means that it is woven out of differences, but also that it sends out, that it delegates, representatives or proxies; but there is no chance that the mandating subject 'exists' somewhere, that it is present or is 'itself', and still less chance that it will become conscious. In this sense, contrary to the terms of an old debate, strongly symptomatic of the metaphysical investments it has always assumed, the 'unconscious' can no more be classed as a 'thing' than as anything else; it is no more of a thing than an implicit or masked consciousness. This radical alterity, removed from every possible mode of presence, is characterized by irreducible aftereffects, by delayed effects. In order to describe them, in order to read the traces of the 'unconscious' traces (there are no 'conscious' traces), the language of presence or absence, the metaphysical speech of phenonemology, is in principle inadequate. (151-52)

The subman is a figure, not of self-presence or of the ontology of presence, but of difference. He is a repetition, "A self of parents who have never died,/Whose lives return, simply" (OP 67), but there is no such thing as a "simple" return. A repetition is always already "other" than the original; or, again, "repetition always already divides the point of departure of the first time" (Derrida, Writing and Difference 213). Neither a stable identity nor a stable origin or end, the subman is a string of figures in endless supplementation: "the man below the man below the man," "the man below," "anti-logician," "a second self," "a self of parents who have never died," "ogre," "a place of a field of lights," "the subverter." [41] As this figure is dismantled, the entire structure topples, because it is precisely in the act of describing the subman that Stevens' text most disturbingly challenges its own ground. He questions that which he aims to describe, so as to make it self-present, "by demonstrating repeatedly that it cannot be named literally, but only in figures that always break down and fail to figure adequately what they 'represent'" (Miller, "Dismembering and Disremembering" 42). Here Miller is analyzing not Stevens' subman, but Freud's descriptions of the mind, yet both texts deconstruct themselves

similarly. Stevens' post-Harmonium text, like Freud's later work according to Miller, "[are] commanded by this necessity of multiple figurative models, each replacing the last" (42).

Still a Rousseauistic interpreter, Stevens concludes his poem with tropes of resolution and unification. Memory and prophecy, the past and the future, "the man and the man below" are dialectically resolved in the momentary immersion in "a present time" (OP 71). Here the self will be self-present and a fully integrated whole; here the "passion merely to be" (OP 71) is achievable. Erasing past and future, the speaker insulates himself in his own ideality by throwing off the cloak "Adorned for a multitude" so as "merely to be." But the capacity to conceive the presence of the present is inconceivable. Knowable only by what it is not--that which is not the past or the future or the imagination or the night--the present is ultimately unknowable as a thing in itself.

In "Difference," Derrida explains how difference always already disturbs or "breaks up" the notion of a primordial and homogeneous unity, such as the metaphysical notion of the pure present.

> Difference is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be 'present', appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by a mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is not even to a past or future considered as a modified present. In order for it to be, an interval must separate it from what it is not; but the interval that constitutes it in the present must also, and by the same token, divide the present in itself, thus dividing, along with the present, everything that can be conceived on its basis, that is, every being--in particular, for our metaphysical language, the substance or subject. (Speech and Phenomena 142-143)

In like manner, the entire host of oppositional terms which appear in the closing

verse paragraph of "Owl's Clover" are not smoothed into unity, but presented as "the emergence of a necessity such that one of the terms appears as the difference of the other, the other as 'differed' within the systematic ordering of the same" (148).[42] In Derridean terms, we see the day as differed-differing night; the man below differing-differed the man above; Jocundus differed-differing the black-blooded scholar; the man of the cloud differing-differed the medium man.[43] The text promises a still-point in the not-yet recovered present, as evidenced by Stevens' repeated usage of the infinitive--to flourish the great cloak, to turn away from farewells, to feel again the reconciliation. But the present is always endlessly deferred or turned away from. The end of the poem is not a return to the immediate world of medium man,[44] but a suspension or hiatus. The cloak is not clipped but "to be clipped;" the night is not yet re-designed but "to be re-designed;" the land-breadth is not stifled but "to be stifled," and the colour is not changed but to be changed. The text "concludes" by opening the very closure it attempts to achieve. Stevens cannot cut or clip his way out of the fabric or differences which is language and, hence, his text. This is the sombre reality of figuration: "no transcendent truth present outside the sphere of writing can theologically command the totality of this field" (Derrida, Speech and Phenomena 135).

IV. "The Man With the Blue Guitar": A Patch Job

A mere six months after the completion of his first version of "Owl's Clover," Stevens began to do exactly what the experience of writing that earlier text made apparent as an impossibility--he began to cut. Without any hint of apology, he opens "The Man with the Blue Guitar" with the announcement that the poet/folk guitarist is also "A shearsman of sorts" (CP 165). After the long, self-indulgent

lines of "Owl's Clover," this new poem takes on a particular poverty, perhaps even a distinct asperity. Leaving the statue behind in "hum-drum space" (OP 71), the poet enters an arena of conflict in section one of "Blue Guitar": green versus blue, they versus you, things as they are versus things as they are changed, the "you must" versus the "I cannot." The conflictual atmosphere is soothed, however, by the no-nonsense, earthly practicality implicit in the trope of the poet as tailor. Bringing with it images of the old country and of colonizers like Crispin, as well as nostalgia for a simpler time when man could restore that which he himself made, this figure is refreshing. His task is to cut and to patch, to sever and to restore--simple enough. It is not without significance then that "The day was green" (CP 165): even Milton's Adam and Eve had to cut and prune the vegetation in their paradisal Eden. The final product--the poem--is an act of excision but, equally, an act of creation. From the very outset the act of playing-patching-poetry writing is presented as the healing link or bridge between dualisms, so much so that we recall these aphorisms in particular: "Poetry is a health" (OP 176); "Poetry is a cure of the mind" (OP 176); "Poetry is a renovation of experience" (OP 177); and "The poet is the intermediary between people and the world in which they live and also, between people as between themselves; but not between people and some other world" (OP 162).[45]

Out of the "wrangling of two dreams" (CP 183)--the desired "bread of time to come" in contestation with the vulgar "actual stone" of reality--comes the unifying harmonies of music. Like the strings of the guitar, whose melodies are released only in the act of being struck, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" produces music out of its own tension, as it is tautly held by the force of cutting and the

equal and opposite force of patching. Yet, finally, the act of poetry writing is the resolution of difference, the healing into unity. Even Helen Vendler, who so astutely pointed out the power play between "two adversarial principles" (OEW 122) in this poem, resolves difference into "pure dualism" (126). Suppressing the other ways in which the poem names itself (to which I shall return momentarily), she privileges its self-designation as a "duet" in section twenty-three. She writes, "since the natural tendency of opposition is the equation of things listed, the lulling of the duet, as it proceeds from its initial 'solutions' to its concluding 'solved', becomes ever less oppositional, until both voices, in identical modification become equally serene and final" (135). Shifting focus from the music produced to the trope of the "shell" of the guitar, as in section seventeen of the poem,[46] Frank Doggett lulls the play of notes into monological order: "[Stevens was] amazed that something as fragile as the individual sense of the world of oneself, that hollow shell that is an identity, can impose its form, hold as in a form whatever rough actuality it receives" (Stevens' Poetry of Thought 82). Lastly, the early Riddel shifted his focus away from both the type of music produced and the origin of the music to the player of the music, only to produce another monological reading: "the waves of gaiety, anxiety, depression, and joy are more smoothly integrated than is obvious, the guitarist commanding every shift of tone and maintaining his identity in that firm command" (CE 147).

Are oppositions reconciled here by the form of the poem, or by its "shell" (the fact that it calls itself a poem and sits on the page as one), or by its poet-author? Can we say without doubt that "Confusion [is] solved, as in a refrain/One keeps on playing year by year" (CP 177)? Or is not the hypnotic repetition of the

refrain, which reduces the duet or doubleness down to the ideality of the same or single, the willed belief of "a man who needed what he had created" (NA 51)? Can we "choose to play/The imagined pine, the imagined jay" (CP 184), or does a more radical play keep subverting our attempts to control the play or even determine the game?

In order to cut himself clear of the labyrinthine entanglements of figuration so as to curtail the frivolity of play in the text, Stevens attempts to make clear, precise demarcations between self and world, blue and green, the imagined and the real. This desire to make pure distinctions is exemplary of what Derrida calls "the logocentric longing par excellence" (OG 167). There is a pure inside and outside the conflict of which is made evident in section one, wherein the masses constitute (by number alone) the inside as opposed to the singular voice of the poet on the outside. There is the sun and the moon or the cold real and the warm ideal (CP 168); the lion in the lute and the lion locked in stone (CP 175); the "gold self aloft" and the "lord of the land" (CP 176); the "voice of ether" and "the other smelling of drink" (CP 177); as well as "Time in its final block" and "time/To come" (CP 183), to name but a few of the poem's dualisms. The poem's restricted dualistic perspective takes on the shape of a Yeatsian dialogue with the self and soul in a letter to Hi Simmons, to whom Stevens wrote that "Poetry is the spirit, as the poem is the body" (L 363).

In this same letter, wherein Stevens "explains" the "meaning" of section twenty-two, we can begin to see how the logocentric longing for absolute distinctions finally results in the erasure of difference because of the evolution of a privileged third term. Notice how the emergence of the figure of equality

neutralizes difference by making one term the metaphor of the other:

> Poetry is a passion, not a habit. This passion nourishes itself on reality. Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality...Thus, reality=the imagination, and the imagination=reality. Imagination gives but it gives in relation. (L 364)[47]

In the poem, Stevens begins by establishing a structure of difference-- issue/return, poetry/poem, imagination/reality--which he then questions by asking "But are these separate?" (CP 177), only to resolve or patch together these separate things by creating a privileged third term--"universal intercourse" (CP 177).[48]

The desire for pure dualisms is a logocentric desire for "definitions" or the ability to "say of what you see in the dark/That it is this or that it is that" (CP 183). It is the desire to know that there is a pure exteriority and a pure interiority, as exhibited by the speaker of section twenty-nine as he sits reading in the cathedral:

> These degustation in the vaults
> Oppose the past and the festival,
>
> What is beyond the cathedral, outside,
> Balances with nuptial song. (CP 181)

But the duet's double voicedness wanders and complicates itself becoming, as it does, a "serenade" (CP 166) and a "rhapsody" (CP 183) in its attempt to deal with polyphonic reality. Irregularity, the aberrational, sneaks into the poem at the moment the poem refers to itself. Preferring to privilege the poem's desire "to sit and to balance things/To and to and to the point of still" (CP 181), Vendler suppresses reference to these highly irregular musical (non)forms in favour of the duet's clarities.

It is interesting to (mis)read section nineteen as an allegory of the desire of Stevens and phenomenological readers to make a monological reading by violently suppressing alterity in a text. Here the speaker wills to impose his lyrical I over the dialogical otherness of the monster or language itself. Only by reducing the monster that is language can the lyrical I achieve Being:

> That I may reduce the monster to
> Myself, and then may be myself
>
> In face of the monster, be more than part
> Of it, more than the monstrous player of
>
> One of its monstrous lutes, not be
> Alone, but reduce the monster and be. (CP 175)

The desire for supremacy or centrality, as indicated by the incantatory repetition of the verbal forms of being, is ground in the need to face the monstrous (the aberrational in language) but, simultaneously, to force it into legibility or determinably specific meanings. Stevens can, therefore, go on to say that the self and language are "Two things, the two together as one,/And play of the monster and of myself" (CP 175), but he has already curtailed the notion of true play with alterity. He does this by establishing the self as an invariable presence by the determination of Being as presence. Hence, the lyrical I wills to be the monster's "intelligence," the interpreter of his signs. "The function of this center," writes Derrida of all attempts to create a logocentric center, "was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure--one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure--but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure" (Writing and Difference 278). Opening with this fantasy-like "That I may," the poem concludes with the establishment of a firm and rigid structure within which the play of language is

made governable and interpretable. "Being" comes "Before" language, which I read as coming in front of or preceding temporally, as distinctly different from, say, Bloom's reading where the two face one another.[49] It is, in short, the sacred origin. The monstrosity or exteriority of language is to be made functional or communicable via the playing of the lute: "Being the lion in the lute/Before the lion locked in stone."[50] Being hinges upon the power to lock the lion in stone, so as to ensure semantic stability.

When Stevens is caught explicating the meaning of section nineteen, he does so in terms Bloom adopted: "I want, as a poet, to be that in nature, which constitutes nature's very self. I want to be nature in the form of a man, with all the resources of nature=I want to be the lion in the lute; and then, when I am, I want to face my parent and be his true part" (L 790). Keep in mind Stevens' earlier letter in which he discusses authorial intentionality in the following simile: a poem is "like a man walking on the bank of a river, whose shadow is reflected in the water" (L 354). Looking again at his 1953 explication of intention, we would have to say that Stevens was "explicating in terms of the man" and consciously ignoring the terms of the shadow even though he knew that "the thing and its double always go together" (L 354). In Stevens' mind, the "intercourse" between man and his shadow, the lion in the lute and the lion locked in stone, the angelic and the animal, the Dichtung and Wahrheit is the effect of "a process of cross-fertilization" or of "hybridization," terms which he, himself, used to praise Marianne Moore's revitalized romanticism (OP 249).[51] The "intermingling" (OP 248) of the real and the imaginary is, by extension, an act of balancing "To and to and to the point of still" (CP 181). The religiously codified metaphysical distinctions or

dualisms that make up this poem/"missal" (CP 177) similarly make of this poem "the book" for which the scholar hungers in section twenty-four.

Though the poem-missal might be soiled with the mud of reality, its dirt is a surface dirt, the "dirt" of figurative language or the exteriority of the signifier. The inner depth of meaning contained in the book is not besmirched. Still for Stevens, and the phenomenological tradition of critics who followed him, the idea of the book is--whether in its totality or in a page or even in a mere "latined phrase" (CP 178)--

> the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified pre-exists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The ideal of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against its aphoristic energy, and...against difference in general. (Derrida, Of Grammatology 18)

Stevens repeats what Derrida calls "the Platonic gesture" (OG 17) by "referring to another model of presence: self-presence in the senses, in the sensible cogito, which simultaneously carries in itself the inscription of divine law" (17). Here the sense of sight predominates in the trope of the "hawk of life," which stands for the poet's learned phrase and which is both dependent on life with its insight (hawk's sharp vision). The romantic pun of the eye/I is repeatedly reinforced: "To meet that hawk's eye and to flinch/Not at the eye but at the joy of it" (CP 178). Again, the missal/poem is "for brooding-sight," a portmaneau word which operates by adding "sight" (seeing, insight, perception) to "brooding" (thinking, voice heard by inner self, full and truthful self-presence). In the final line of section twenty-four, Stevens' reference to "play" at first appearance subverts the firmly grounded--mudded--logocentric book. But the "I play" (or is it the "eye" play of the senses?)

is quickly suppressed. The conjunction "But" forces the reader back to the logocentrically-sanctioned notion of thought as self-presence: "I play. But this is what I think" (CP 178). The play of language, like the surface "dirt" of figurative language or even the signifier itself, is a controlled play. Like the entirety of section twenty-four itself, the play of language is circumvented by a metaphysics of the book (opening line) and of self-present thought (closing line).

Only much later was Stevens able to mock gently his earlier desire to believe in "the book" replete with its simplistic balancing of oppositional forces. In "Connoisseur of Chaos" he writes,

> After all the pretty contrast of life and death
> Proves that these opposite things partake of one,
> At least that was the theory, when bishops' books
> Resolved the world. We cannot go back to that. (CP 215)

The "pretty" theocentric beliefs of the "bishops' books" are undone by "The squirming facts [that] exceed the squamous mind" (CP 215). Stevens, in his maturity, knew that "To say the solar chariot is junk/Is not a variation but an end" (CP 332)--an end of the book, in Derridean terms, and the beginning of the text. To endure "These days of disinheritance" (CP 227) meant accepting man's casting out from the center of a diamond" (CP 322). From the primacy of a God-like centrality, man now endures "a constant secondariness" (CP 506). Only much later did Stevens realize that his dream--that "One thing remaining, infallible, would be/Enough (CP 247)--was interrupted by "a heavy difference" (CP 263) or "the difficult difference" (CP 332), as he states in "Montrachet-Le-Jardin" and "The Pure Good of Theory" respectively. "Difference invites us," Gayatri Spivak explains in her introduction to Of Grammatology, "to undo the need for balanced equations, to see if each term in an opposition is not after all an accomplice of the other" (lix).

But in 1937, Stevens was like both the character in "Esthetique du Mal" who "disposes the world in categories" (CP 323) and Canon Aspirin in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" who "imposes orders as he thinks of them" (CP 403). In the act of nailing his poem into clear, rational, binary poles, Stevens suppresses "the difficult difference" and relaxes into the consolations of the metaphysical. "So,/In the metaphysical, there are these poles," Stevens claims with ease in "The Glass of Water" (CP 197).

The impulse in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" to cut a clear line of demarcation between poles is, however, more problematical than one may initially think. To cut anything is to cut something up, out, or off. The text as we have it is already a castrated text, a severed text(ile), even though what remains is seemingly patched or restored into oppositional harmonies--a serenade or a collage.[32] Stevens may wish to stress its lyrical force in the figure of the shearsman and the poet as patcher of fragments into unity. But the reader is aware that something has been cut off from that which is before him or her. Curiously enough, it is exactly what Stevens attempts to cut out--"that gold self aloft" (CP 176), "torches wisping in the underground" (CP 167), "a final atmosphere" (CP 168)--that becomes central by his concerted effort to underscore its marginality. The marginal (that which is cut off) and the privileged (that which remains) are uncannily engaged with one another. As Stevens wrote in "Les Plus Belles Pages" (with a particularly Nietzschian flair), "Nothing exists by itself" (CP 244). "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is a cut text, a violated text, despite the desire of this modern man of imagination to weld "'this hoard/Of destructions'" (CP 173) into meaning with "all/Confusion solved" (CP 177). From his will to cut clear lines and distinctions,

Stevens likewise cuts his ties to the metaphysical realm: "He spoke,/ Kept speaking, of God. I changed the word to man" (CP 245). It is radically ironic though that in cutting these ties, Stevens inescapably entangles himself in the metaphysical at the very moment he tries to excise it from the text.

The previous wholeness, which we now know only by its absence, surfaces covertly when the speaker concedes that he "cannot bring the world quite round" (CP 165) again. His Rousseauistic desire to recapture or restore this by-gone ideal is again alluded to in section twenty-six. In the contestation between the contemporary chaos of a "swarm of thoughts" and the nostalgic "swarm of dreams/Of inaccessible Utopia," what is ultimately foregrounded is "A mountainous music [which] always seemed/To be falling and to be passing away" (CP 179). What he silently desires is the "metaphysical metaphor" (CP 301), as he names it in "Chocorua To Its Neighbor." Therefore, although Stevens wants his poem to announce the death of God (as did the madman in Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra) so as to prepare the way for that "great poem of earth [which] remains to be written" (NA 142), severance is not so deftly accomplished. The gods' failure to adhere to the real (NA 4-5) and their consequent transformation into "gorgeous nonsense," marked their presence becoming an absence--"they came to nothing" (OP 206)--an absence which has since been replaced by the presence of the self. Yet self-presence is only comprehensible within the context of the gods' absence; in short, Stevens cannot cut his way free of the metaphysical, which he desires to marginalize by claiming the gods' exteriority.

Just as in Keats' "Hyperion" poems, the death of the gods is here represented as a supplanting or a supplementation. For our knowledge of the

supplement, we turn again to Derrida. His treatment in Of Grammatology of Rousseau's Essay on the Origin of Language leads him to claim that "only the concept of the supplement allows us to think the relationship between nature and law here" (173) or between any dualisms--subject/ object, internal/external, voice/writing. "These two terms," he writes, "have no meaning except within the structure of supplementarity" (173, emphasis mine). So, although Stevens attempts to sever all ties with the gods in order to praise man "Alone," man "Without shadows, without magnificence,/The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone" (CP 176), severance is neither pure nor simple. Rather, it is already implicated in supplementarity.

Section twenty-one opens on this very unsettling note: "A substitute for all the gods:/This self, not that gold self aloft" (CP 176). The gods and the self are already an accomplice of one another, yet the supplement disrupts this hierarchically structured opposition. It also disrupts the line of genealogical transmission, turning it back upon itself: "The people, not the priests, make the gods" (OP 208). The first overturning of the hierarchy then instigates endless supplementarity or a repeated "taking the place of":

Poetry

> Exceeding music must take the place
> Of empty heaven and its hymns,
>
> Ourselves in poetry must take their place,
> Even in the chattering of your guitar. (CP 167)

Poetry will take the place of an "empty" heaven and, in doing so, will add itself as "a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence" (Derrida, OG 144). In a second, inescapable gesture, it will "[add] only to replace"

(OG 145). By employing Derridan thinking as a model, we can see that man in his poetry will supplement heaven's emptiness because

> it intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [suppleant] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place [tient-lieu]. As a substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can be filled up of itself, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself. (OG 145)

But, again as Derrida reminds us, the supplement--man in his poetry, man alone--is always "exterior," always "outside of the positivity to which it is super-added," always "alien to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it" (145). In recognizing the exteriority of the supplement, the poem must similarly recognize the gods' interiority even as it consistently underscores their exteriority. Hence, Derrida writes, "The outside bears with the inside a relationship that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority. The meaning of the outside was always present within the inside, imprisoned outside the outside, and vice versa" (35).

Contaminating the inside with the outside and the outside with the inside, the supplement disturbs the logocentric longing to dissolve alterity into identity. Yet, at the same time that the poem announces its disengagement from antiquated metaphysical consolations--"the integrations of the past are like/A Museo Olimpico" (CP 342)--it simultaneously rests on the logocentric ground of binary poles. In section seven, the opening lines again trace Stevens' proclivity to create identity out of dualities:

> It is the sun that shares our works.
> The moon shares nothing. It is a sea.

When shall I say of the sun,
It is a sea; it shares nothing. (CP 168)

Again, Stevens aims to resolve difference (sun and moon) into identity (sea) by the creation of a third term in a metaphorical structure ("It is a sea").[33] Such "Hegelian idealism," explains Derrida in Positions, "consists precisely of a relève of the binary oppositions of classical idealism, a resolution of contradiction into a third term that comes in order to aufheben, to deny while raising up, while idealizing, while sublimating into an anamnesic interiority (Errinnerung), while interning difference in a self-presence" (43). In this same interview of 1971, Derrida reminds us that "in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful co-existence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy" where "one of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand" (41).[34] "To deconstruct the opposition, first of all," he continues, "is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment" (41). And it is this overturning that the supplement succeeds in doing. Insidiously the marginal becomes central and vice versa. The power flips from one term to the other and back again. Finally, the dreamed of "peaceful coexistence" can only be projected into the not as yet future. So when Stevens writes "When shall I come to say of the sun,/ It is a sea," he is foregrounding an idealized unity and, yet, perpetually deferring any possibility of its arrival.

The supplement, therefore, forever reveals and conceals the unspeakable mystery. It cannot be settled by the imposition of masculine logic or reason, which is what makes section three so comical. Here the poet as mad scientist is so driven by his desire "to play man number one" that he engages in a step-by-step, slow dissection, the violence of which is revealed in an escalating string of destructive infinitives: "to drive the dagger in his heart," "To lay his brain upon the board,"

"[To] pick the living colors out," "To nail his thought across the door," "To strike," "To tick," "To bang it" (CP 166). But the failure of the logical process of dissection to arrive at the inner central core is revealed in the closing ellipsis, which is actually a wound left open, unhealable and incurable. The severed fragments of "man number one" lie in pieces that do not make a whole, like the torn body of truth in Milton's Areopagitica. The supplement makes promise of a central presence, but "a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute" (Derrida, Writing and Difference 280). As Stevens writes in "The Pure Good of Theory," "It is never the thing but the version of the thing" (CP 332). In short, the supplement is "ever the prelude to your end" (CP 170): it dangles the promise of semantic closure before our eyes and yet defers its arrival, leaving us always on the threshold and "ever [in] the prelude." It is "The discord [that] merely magnifies" (CP 171), for it initiates a string of substitutions without end.

Like the supplement, which "harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary" (Derrida, OG 144), the long poem as a form is the site of the strange cohabitation of the lyric and narrative impulse. As Tilottama Rajan explains, in "Romanticism and Death of Lyric Consciousness," in a "semiotics of genre...the pure lyric [uses] its proximity to song in order to mute the gaps between signifier and signified by conferring on the words the illusory unity of a single voice" (Lyric Poetry 196). But narrative, she goes on to explain, "dramatizes the gaps between what is told and the telling of it" (196). The desire for a dream to believe in is the desire to assert a monological unity. Unlike the "pagan in a varnished car," in "whom none believes" (CP 170), the poet wishes to

"sing a hero's head" (CP 165). And the song of this "old fantoche" (CP 181) will be

> A dream (to call it a dream) in which
> I can believe, in face of the object,
>
> A dream no longer a dream, a thing,
> Of things as they are. (CP 174)

The lyrical impulse is such that the dream--the believable fiction--be transformed and fixed into a thing. So, when "the thinking of god is smoky dew," then we can go "beyond the compass of change" and "[perceive] in a final atmosphere," for only then does "the thinking of art seem final" (CP 168). The muting of the gaps is the soothing of discord or otherness into lyric unity.

The lyrical imagination is best epitomized in section twelve:

> Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar
> And I are one. The orchestra
>
> Fills the high hall with shuffling men
> High as the hall. The whirling noise
>
> Of a multitude dwindles, all said,
> To his breath that lies awake at night.
>
> I know that timid breathing. Where
> Do I begin and end? And where,
>
> As I strum the thing, do I pick up
> That which momentously declares
>
> Itself not to be I and yet
> Must be. It could be nothing else. (CP 171)

Here, the lyrical imagination, unable to imagine radical alterity by definition, silences the "whirling noise" of the "multitude" into the single sound of its own breath (voice). Even the momentous declaration of the guitar's alterity is muted into oneness: "Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar/And I are one." This dream

of lyric unity and oneness is an illusion but an accepted one. So much so is this the case that, in section twenty, belief in lyric homogeneity is fixed or made into a "thing" as the poet transforms its fluid verbal quality into the solidity of a noun: "Believe would be a brother full/Of love, believe would be a friend" (CP 175). Love, friendship, oneness--these are the tropes evoked to express the unitive power of the lyrical, monological impulse in the long poem.

Yet narrative also strangely cohabits the site of the long poem. It supplements (adds to) the lyric homogeneity and presence, as well as supplements (takes the place of) its emptiness, since it can only be filled, as Derrida says, by proxy or sign, never the thing itself. Narrative always stands to represent the insistent gap between what is told--the dream to be believed in--and the telling of it--never the dream (the old fantoche), but always its substitute (always a mask that "is strange, however like" [CP 181]). As a narrative, the long poem is, in Tilottama Rajan's words, "always already within a world of textuality, of interpretation rather than origination" (Lyric Poetry 196). The magnifying discord of the emergent narrative dialogism is, from the perspective of lyric autotelism, "the chord that falsifies" (CP 171). But the same discord, from the perspective of narrative dialogism, is that life-saving strangeness that refuses to be "solved, as in a refrain" (CP 177). It is the play that erupts in the absence between the poem's issue and its return (CP 176).

This gap, this dialogism, stems from the self-proliferation of signs without end, in endless supplementarity. Twirling the world upon his nose, the trope-maker strangely links the solid (fir trees) and the liquid (cats) until cats produce cats, and world produces worlds, and grey is green is gray, in a stream of likenesses that are

yet differences:

> Sombre as fir-trees, liquid cats
> Moved in the grass without sound.
>
> They did not know the grass went round.
> The cats had cats and the grass turned gray
>
> And the world had worlds, ai, this-a-way:
> The grass turned green and the grass turned gray. (CP 178)

By extension, nowhere in the poem is the dialogical play of endless supplementarity more foregrounded than in section twenty-nine, wherein the poem leaves us with two dangling similes: "To say of one mask it is like,/To say of another it is like" (CP 181). The syntactic parallelism of these lines seems, on the one hand, to stifle the play of language by twice ending on a note of similitude. The lyric affirmation of likeness--the healing of difference into identity--is threatened however by the dangling nature of these similes. The effect of reading these lines is that they stutter; they trip over themselves as if trying desperately to enforce unity where only difference exists.

Reading for the difference means learning to see that all resemblances are only illusions, since the comparison is between masks (signifiers) to begin with, not with real faces or essences (signifieds). To read for the difference, which narrative dialogism teaches us and Stevens' poem urges us to do, is "'To know that the balance does not quite rest,/That the mask is strange, however like'" (CP 181). In section twenty-nine, the similes fail because they cannot erase the foundation of strangeness or error. They can and do, however, remain open; in other words, dangling as they do at the lines' end, they tease the reader into supplying the missing resemblance, as though playing a game of fill-in-the-blank. They succeed brilliantly, only because they fail as they must; they open the endless play of

supplementarity (always the sign, never the thing), only because they cannot mute the difference which strangely cohabits each attempt at figuration.

Perhaps section twenty-six best illustrates the curious cohabitation in the long poem of the lyric impulse in necessary contestation with the narrative impulse. Here we find the "giant that fought/Against the murderous alphabet" (CP 179), which is just one trope in a string of tropes describing what the world is. The diachronic nature of the world, like that long poem itself, issues from the giant/poet's fight to will meaning out of the murderous alphabet/ language's refusal to point clearly from the signifier to the signified. Emphasizing the alphabet, as opposed to the word (Logos), the trope bespeaks the murdering of sense or meaning, as well as the lyric desire to suppress difference in favor of semantic stability.

Hence, self-contestation is the governing mode of the closing verses: lyric versus narrative, the Cathedral versus the festival (CP 181), inside versus outside, the mirror versus the mask (CP 181), Olympia versus Oxidia (CP 182), the "lark fixed in the mind" versus the employer and employee (CP 182), "you" versus "the shape you take" (CP 183), the dream versus the mud (CP 183), and the daily forgetfulness versus the moments of play (CP 184). Despite the poet's attempt to mend difference into identity, resolution is impossible. As Stevens writes in "Idiom of the Hero," "This chaos will not be ended"; subsequently, even the poet admits that "I am the poorest of all./I know that I cannot be mended" (CP 201). What disturbs the centralizing impulse of the poem--the dream of saying and believing that "You are yourself" (CP 183)--is the decentralizing figure of the old fantoche. The figure is the effaced or masked figure, who is aligned with the festival going

on outside of the cathedral. It is not without significance that, unlike the Franciscan don who is only fully himself in the self-reflexive mirror, the fantoche is aligned with the disseminative forces of the wind. Also, unlike the "hero's head" (CP 165) which the poet will "sing" into existence, the fantoche will "evolve." The notion of evolution evokes not a simultaneous lyric birth but a gradual development by differentiation of parts and functions into a more highly organized condition. His evolution by differentiation is more closely aligned to the narrative impulse. Consequently, "His strutting [is to be] studied through centuries" (CP 181), which is to say that he is an object of interpretation and not, as Tilottima Rajan reminded us, of "origination." The lone poet in the cathedral and the old fantoche together epitomize all utterance as the "contradiction-ridden, tension filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language" (Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination 272): monological/dialogical, centripetal/centrigual, centralization/decentralization, individual utterance/social and historical context.

In the language theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, the clown plays a pivotal role: he disrupts the hierarchy that privileges a "single proto-language" (271). He is the figure of subversion, or perhaps what Stevens, in his less playful moments, would call "The demon that cannot be himself,/That tours to shift the shifting scene" (CP 180). Here is Bakhtin's description, in The Dialogic Imagination, of the overturning of the hierarchy:

> At the time when major divisions of the poetic genres were developing under the influence of the unifying, centralizing, centripetal forces of verbal-ideological life, the novel--and those artistic prose genres that gravitate toward it [I, like Bakhtin, cast the long poem in this (non)genre]--was being historically shaped by the current of decentralizing, centrifugal forces. At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world...on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown

> sounded forth, ridiculing all "languages" and dialects; there developed the literature of the fabliaux.., where there was no language-center at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the "languages" of poets, scholars, monks,...where all "languages" were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face. (272-273 emphasis mine)

Hence, the space of the long poem is the dramatic stage for the clown; it is the space dominated by "madness" and "jocular procreations" (CP 183) despite the lyrical desire to make hierarchical distinctions. Here, on the space/stage of the long poem, we have no authentic faces at all,[55] only masks that are like...

The concluding couplet vacillates uneasily now. While we desire to read it as testimony of our power to control the play of language (and thus circumvent it in that we can choose not to), we realize that to read it thus flies in the face of the form of the poem itself. The long poem, like language itself, is torn between violently conflicting tendencies: lyrical/narrative, monological/dialogical, "I"/"my adversary" (CP 170). It is a "chiaroscuro" (CP 172), in that it is simultaneously clear and obscure. At the very moment that we think that we govern language (when we see ourselves as "the heraldic center of the world" [CP 172]), we suddenly realize that, in point of fact, language is governing us (we are actually "caught" in a web of discourse and so, like the flies in section eleven, we remain "Wingless and withered, but living alive" [CP 171]). Yet, then again, at the very moment that the text throws itself into the bitter, discordant reality of "Monday's dirty light" (CP 183), we still hear the echo of a monological discourse in the theological language of "bread" and "stone." In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," these tendencies are irresolvable.

In "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetary," "Owl's Clover," and "The Man with the Blue Guitar," we encounter "unexplored seas" that taunt us--as

"Geographers and philosophers" (CP 179)--to chart a meaningful route through them but, over and over again, they resist our attempts to take this stream of images and to make them "fixed as a photograph" (CP 180). Devoid of an absolute center or transcendental signified, these poems no longer have any "organic consolation" (CP 309). The monological "I" is continually in violent contestation with the dialogical world of reality; hence, the trope of the line of self-present thought is complicated and knotted, leaving the reader to wander in error with no clear path "home." Unlike the chronological line of development witnessed in "The Comedian as the Letter C," these poems engage in a more radical narrative, which is the grammatological play of language itself. These long poems mark a site, a space, wherein language jostles in an endlessly supplementary fashion. They do not culminate in climactic moments of self-present meaning because, by definition, they defy the traditional formalist principles of systematization (the beginning, middle, and end or, more succinctly, "Aristotle's skeleton" [CP 327]) and closure. Only in the form of the long poem could Stevens "[attend] the difficult difference" (CP 332). But in these three poems Stevens is still haunted by "Plato's ghost" (CP 327): he still thinks that by brushing away "the colossal illusion of heaven," as he writes in "Landscape With Boat," he would "arrive/At the neutral centre, the ominous element,/The single-colored, colorless, primitive" (CP 241-242). The desire to "arrive" is exemplary of the Rousseauistic desire to trek the route back home again--back to truth and meaning and semantic stability.

ENDNOTES

[1]One is inclined to recollect Yeats' line: "Does the imagination dwell the most/Upon a woman won or a woman lost?"

[2]The connection I make between wandering, error, and aberration in Stevens is, already incorporated in Derrida's use of the word errance. As the translator of Speech and Phenomena explains, this word is "the accepted French translation of Heidegger's die Irre (xli). Allison explains that "Richardson first introduced the term into English as 'errance,' and he gives an admirable justification for it, noting that it incorporates not only the sense of 'error' but also that of 'aberrance,' i.e., of being off course, wandering away from the truth." See William J. Richardson's Heidegger: Through Phenomenology To Thought, 224.

[3]I use the phrase "grammatological play" in a Derridean sense. Derrida, in Positions, "defines" grammatology as "the science of textuality" (34) and a text as "a network of textual referrals to other texts, a textual transformation in which each allegedly 'simple term' is marked by the trace of another term, the presumed interiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own exteriority. It is always already carried outside itself. It already differs (from itself) before any act of expression" (33).

[4]Poetry, 45 (Feb. 1935): 239-249.

[5]A consummate model of this logocentric logic can be found in Rosenthal and Gall's study of Pound's Pisan Cantos in The Modern Poetic Sequence (1983). Given their "logic," it goes without saying that they would find this section of The Cantos to be "the outstanding group in the volume" (204). Despite the polylingual nature of the text, "the context provided by the Cantos as a whole prevents such rapid shifts from irreparably fragmenting the poetry" (207). And what "context" have we? They argue that "we have the construction of a complex chamber of sensibility, within which resonate the tonalities of a desperately suffering yet exquisitely alert and creative self" (219-220). Having named the ground and given their logic, their conclusion is immanent. Here they state the obvious: "Pound needed all his artistic resources to give the multiple aspects of his poem full play and yet provide a self-contained form, prismatically unified" (220-221).

[6]Apart from indicating a deviation from a right, customary, or natural course or condition, "aberration" also means partial mental derangement. In astronomy, it refers to "an apparent displacement of a heavenly body, caused by the effect of relative motion on its light;" also, in optics, it indicates "the failure of a lens or mirror to bring all light rays to the same focus" (Funk and Wagnalls 1976).

[7]In "Force and Signification," Derrida analyzes the radical contradictoriness between what structuralism promises to do and how it is applied. He notes that because structuralism is insistent "upon preserving the coherence and completion of each totality," it cannot accommodate the "mysterious deviation" (Writing and Difference, 26). Like Stevens, he names that which the structure cannot map the "aberrational":

> To be a structuralist is first to concentrate on the organization of meaning, on the autonomy and idiosyncratic balance, the completion of each moment, each form; it is to refuse to relegate everything that is not comprehensible as an ideal type to the status of aberrational accident (26).

[8]Although Stevens candidly opens this poem with a Donnian-like claim that "Panoramas are not what they used to be" (CP 134), he cannot embrace this "panorama of despair" (CP 135) with Nietzschian affirmation. Stevens' poem is riddled with a nostalgic desire for "the essential theme" that will fix the "central composition" (CP 135). The same desire motivates Hart Crane, in a letter to Otto H. Kahn, to speak of his poem as providing "a more organic panorama" (The Complete Poems 248): "an assimilation of this experience...showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present" (248). Both poets typify the bifurcated modernist response to the new age, and yet both react with a similar vision of the poet as that critical figure who can recapture for us the "Unfractured idiom" under whose shadow we exist in daily life (Crane, "The Bridge," 46).

[9]Milton J. Bates, in Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self gives a brief but clear account of the pressure between those advocates of pure poetry and those of political poetry. Bates describes almost a form of gang warfare between the "ivory tower" poets and the "street" poets in America in the 1930's (165-166), in order to account for why Stevens bade farewell to his pure poetry (repeatedly captured in the trope of the outmoded waltz) and began to formulate for himself a new, more skeptical romantic (166ff).

[10]Loath to explain his own work (L 346), for reasons other than the fact that Stevens always did so badly, he interprets the bride as "literally 'sun and music' etc.; not so literally, love and happiness" and these counter figures as "literally the inept politician, and that sort of thing, and again not quite so literally, evil and unhappiness" (L 347).

[11]A. Walton Litz makes no significant advancement over Vendler's arguments made seven years earlier. "The result of Stevens' method," he writes, "is a poetic sequence which has the spontaneous appearance of a harrowing of the poet's mind" (IV 185).

[12]See Whitman's "Weave in, My Hardy Life" (Leaves 382). Also recall his line "Always a knit of identity, always distinction" (24). The knitting of threads allows for the incorporation of difference, but difference becomes neutralized in the process. Valorization is given to the unifying process of knitting.

[13]In the 1805 version of Book I of The Prelude, Wordsworth similarly names the center and restricts its play by using a framing metaphor:

> The mind of man is framed even like the breath
> And harmony of music; There is a dark
> Invisible workmanship that reconciles
> Discordant elements, and makes them move
> In one society.

(Wordsworth: The Prelude, A Parallel Text 52, 54)

[14]One dimension of Stevens toyed hypothetically with this romantic notion. In "Theory," Stevens writes, "I am what is around me" (CP 86).

[15]I am inclined to recollect Wordsworth's words, spoken in the 1805 version of Book II of The Prelude: "observation of affinities/In objects where no brotherhood exists/To common minds" (94). By 1850, however, he made a significant change when he substituted "passive minds" (95) for "common minds." Although logocentric critics emphasize the active function of their role--to make wholeness---it is, I would argue, an intellectually easier task to assume that a poem forms a whole than to pursue actively the possibility that it does not.

[16]In Of Grammatology, Derrida describes one dimension of traditional readings as follows, "once one has thus blinded oneself to the very tissue of the [literary] 'symptom,' to its proper texture, one cheerfully exceeds it toward a psychobiographical signified whose link with the literary signifier then becomes perfectly extrinsic and contingent" (159).

[17]Again, see Derrida's essay "Difference" in Speech and Phenomena, wherein he writes that, "these terms can be related with the entire thematics of active interpretation, which substitutes an incessant deciphering for the disclosure of truth as a presentation of the thing itself in its presence, etc. What results is a cipher without truth, or at least a system of ciphers that is not dominated by truth value, which only then becomes a function that is understood, inscribed, and circumscribed" (149, emphasis mine).

[18]Precedent was set by Whitman in Leaves of Grass, wherein he announces that no fictional character but he, himself, is all things: "Walt Whitman, a kosmos" (41).

[19]Williams' use of the serpent image is particularly grounded in onto-theological, linear assumptions:

> The (self)direction has been changed
> the serpent
> its tail in its mouth,
> 'the river has returned to its beginnings'
> and backward .
> (and forward)
> it tortures itself within me
> until time has been washed finally under:
> and 'I knew all (or enough)
> it became me . ' (Paterson 233)

[20]Merle Brown's argument for how a poem is written, and by extension read, is exemplary of this mode of logocentric reasoning which has at its base a metaphysics of presence: "A poem is a human act of self-translation, of translating the dark current of feelings into translucent gems...If the poet has translated his

feelings far enough, a reader can work his way back through its ritualized forms to its savage center, to the most elemental feeling the poet has of life itself" (Wallace Stevens: The Poem as Act 14, 17, emphasis mine).

[21]In The Will to Power, Nietzsche challenges the metaphysical notion of the self as a constant, knowable thing. This "habit of belief" is just that, a habit not the truth (273). He would recognize Doggett's stabilizing of the self as a way of dealing with "the multiplicity of change" (270): "We would know nothing of time and motion if we did not, in a course of fashion, believe we see what is at 'rest' beside what is in motion" (281).

[22]In establishing a line of poetic inheritance from Whitman through to Stevens, I would also like to present an analogous reading of this stanza. The "leaden pigeon" and the symmetrical "leaden mate" evoke "the line of logico-philosophical speech or that of its integral and symmetrical opposite, logico-empirical speech" (Derrida, Speech and Phenomena 135). It is this line of philosophy and empiricism that Derrida sees as complicated by a certain errance or differance, because "the concept of play [jeu] remains beyond this opposition" (135).

[23]My usage of the word "deferral" is to evoke Derrida's neologism "difference." He writes in "Differance" that

> The verb "to differ" [differer] seems to differ from itself. On the one hand, it indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernability; on the other, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a spacing and temporalizing that puts off until 'later' what is impossible...In the one case "to differ" signifies nonidentity; in the other case it signifies the order of the same...We provisionally give the name differance to this sameness which is not identical: by the silent writing of its a, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, both as spacing/temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation. (Speech and Phenomena 129-130)

[24]Although Miller does not allude to M. M. Bakhtin in his essay, he does speak in a Bakhtinian voice when he discusses the inevitable transformation from the monological to the dialogical when he discusses the critic's quandary as he attempts to make distinctions of terminology only to find that such distinctions breakdown. But as Bakhtin would say, "The living utterance...cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogical threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue" (The Dialogic Imagination 276).

[25]The masked figure--for Bakhtin, the rogue, the clown, and the fool--holds center stage during carnival time when the laws of society are suspended and only freedom itself reigns: "The carnival is the fluctuating form of freedom itself, the acting out or performance of nonrestraint, flexibility, multiplicity, otherness...The carnival is the repeated affirmation of the possibility of alternative relations in the midst of order and control" (David Carroll, 80-81).

[26]The numbering of the stanzas reinforces the notion of the line in narrative by introducing sequentiality: that "would be perfection" if "1" led to "2" to "3",

and so forth. But here the relation between stories remains uncertain and impenetrable. There is and can never be a "central formulation" because every time we trace a line to its root, it breaks or forks into another possible story/interpretation.

[27]Stevens captures the idea of wandering toward some intangible goal in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer. Although writing in 1938, after the publication of "The Man With the Blue Guitar," he states,

> The few things I have already done have merely been preliminary. I cannot believe that I have done anything of real importance... Thinking about poetry is, with me, an affair of weekends and holidays, a matter of walking to & from the office. This makes it difficult to progress rapidly and certainly. Besides, I very much like the idea of something ahead; I don't care to make exhaustive effort to reach it, to see what it is (L 333).

[28]Vendler's astute reading of "Like Decorations" made much of the poem's failure to provide us with verbs. Rather than interpret this syntactical incompleteness as a Nietzschian interpreter, she proceeds as a Rousseauistic interpreter, strongly grounding these fragments in the central mind from which they emanated: "this yields a quality of epigram...which helps to give the poem its extraordinary aridity and partly it strengthens the sense that these are jottings, adagia, epitaphs, the daily pensées of the inspector of gravestones" (69-70).

[29]Lukács' nostalgic description of a known world can be related to Stevens' apostrophe to the American pioneers in section two of "A Duck for Dinner." Stevens refrains from alluding to a Transcendental Signified (pattern ordained in the heavens), because for him these men epitomized American individualism, being as they were "ends in themselves" (OP 61). Coming from "a known world" (L 371), these pioneers came equipped with "The scholar's outline..., the print/Of London, the paper of Paris magnified/By poets, the Italian lines preserved" (OP 61). But the passing of the pioneers is marked by a new stage setting. Now day no longer comes upon the spirit as life itself, for the masses live in "this hacked up world of tools" where day comes as "A penny sun in a tinsel sky" (OP 61).

[30]See The Necessary Angel 26-27, on the violence of reality and the poet's responsibility to resist. Also, Stevens' theological trope of conversion, used to describe the poet's function regarding reality and the imagination, is an economical trope earlier in the essay. In section two, he writes of poetry's origin in the "transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet." This seepage into his language of economical language and issues--recall his taxation allusion in "The Noble Rider" essay--is particularly understandable given the depression years in which he was writing.

[31]Vendler seems to be relying here on an Eliotic view of literary history. T. S. Eliot's historical interpretation hinges on a cataclysmic point of rupture, which took place in the seventeenth century. While the early Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, like the Metaphysical poets, "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience," by the seventeenth century "a dissociation of

sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered" (Eliot, Selected Prose 64).

[32]See New Masses, 1 Oct. 1935, 41-42. Recall also that Stevens omitted Mr. Burnshaw's name from this section of the poem, when he attempted to generalize the issues for the poem's reprinting in The Man With the Blue Guitar (October 1937). This decision left the voice of Mr. Burnshaw as an echo sounding in the background. For Stevens' opinion of Burnshaw and his review, see his letter of October 9, 1935 to Ronald Lane Latimer (L 286).

[33]Stevens was always etymologically astute, and the word "bosh" is rooted in the Turkish language (Oxford English Dictionary).

[34]In section four of "A Duck for Dinner," we are reminded that perhaps we ought to consider the possibility that "Suppose, instead of failing, it never comes,/This future" (OP 63).

[35]In The Will to Power, Nietzsche denounces the notion of a thing-in-itself as a fiction, as part of "the fable of knowledge": "Coming to know means 'to place oneself in a conditional relation to something'; to feel oneself conditioned by something and oneself to condition it--it is therefore under all circumstances establishing, denoting, and making-conscious of conditions (not forthcoming entities, things, what is 'in-itself')" (301).

[36]"I intend to do a set of six or seven STATUES," wrote Stevens on November 21, 1935 (L 296).

[37]"The biggest fable of all is the fable of knowledge," Nietzsche writes, "One would like to know what things-in-themselves are; but behold, there are no things-in-themselves! But even supposing there were an in-itself, an unconditional thing, it would for that very reason be unknowable! Something unconditional cannot be known; otherwise it would not be unconditioned. Coming to know, however, is always 'placing oneself' in a conditional relation to something" (Will to Power 301).

[38]"My great difficulty," writes Stevens to Latimer in November of 1935, "in developing a method is that I do not keep on writing poetry; I am busy every day...This makes it more or less necessary to make a good many fresh starts and each fresh start is a waste of time" (L 291).

[39]The "insight" of the sculptor in "A Duck for Dinner" is sanctioned by the logocentric tradition because the fusion of the art piece with the man in the present and the promised future evokes a unified whole, unthreatened by difference. His vision as materialized in the horses is capable of healing over the accidents of history. To borrow a Stevensian logic, we could say that this particular figure remains vivid or "vital" because, in it, the imagination adheres to what is real (NA 7).

[40]Unlike Patke, Vendler more accurately argues that the subman is unable to resolve the poem, because the statue cannot be "scaled to interior space alone," since it needs "cosmic space" (87). The dismissal of the subman and its subsequent

replacement with the portent serves to "resurrect" the statue, placing it in its proper sphere (91). As figure upon figure collapses in Vendler's reading, she claims that Stevens is violently attempting to apotheosize Absence into Presence (117), all tne while refusing to look at the dump or the real world.

[41]When analyzing Freud's descriptions of the mind, J. Hillis Miller cannot help but repeat the very deconstructions that Freud is, himself, led into. Freud radically questions that which he aims to describe "by demonstrating repeatedly that it cannot be named literally, but only in figures that always break down and fail to figure adequately what they 'represent.'" Consequently, "all of Freud's later work is commanded by this necessity of multiple figurative models, each replacing the last" ("Dismembering and Disremembering" 42).

[42]See Spivak's description of Derrida's usage of "economy": "Economy is a metaphor of energy--where two opposed forces playing against each other constitute the so-called identity of a phenomena... Economy is not a reconciliation of opposites, but rather a maintaining of disjunction. Identity constituted by difference is economy" (Of Grammatology x1ii).

[43]The two different meanings of difference are inseparable: "differing [le differer] as discernibility, distinction, deviation, diastem, spacing; and deferring [le differer] as detour, delay, relay, reserve, temporalizing" (Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, 149).

[44]See Litz, IV 228.

[45]Recall, also Stevens' words when he received a medal from the Poetry Society of America: "We are, here, a group of people who regard poetry as one of the sanctions of life. We believe it to be a vital engagement between the imagination and reality. The outcome of that engagement, if successful, is fulfillment" (OP 239).

[46]The trope of the shell is echoed in "Chocorua To Its Neighbour" in the poet's description of the "self of selves" as "a shell of dark blue glass." Its blue is "of the pole of blue/And of the brooding mind" (CP 297), which again stresses the metaphysical notions of duality and self-present thought.

[47]In her analysis of metaphor, Jacqueline Vaught Brogan writes, "The mathematical representation of this process or model of language would be 'X=Y'. As the 'equals' mark indicates, there is a bridge in metaphor...metaphor is neither a transfer of meaning from one term to another, nor the displacement of one term (or sign) by another, but the creation of a new term that is a function of the 'interanimation' of X and Y" (Stevens and Simile 50).

[48]This same movement can be traced in section twelve of "Esthetique du Mal." In stanza one, he "disposes the world in categories, thus:/The peopled and the unpeopled." These clear demarcations are challenged in stanza two: "Is it himself in them that he knows or they/In him?" Resolution is offered in stanza three with the logical arrival at the paradoxical knowledge that "This creates a third

world without knowledge" (CP 323).

[49](PC 130).

[50]In J. Hillis Miller's article, "Theoretical and Atheoretical in Stevens," he discusses section nineteen as exemplary of an Aristotelian theory of poetry as imitation: "The logos as being comes into the open by way of the logos as words." Hence, "in poetry the logos or 'being' comes to be in language" (Wallace Stevens: A Celebration 276, 278).

[51]See Stevens' letter to Hi Simons regarding his developmental progression from his childhood theory that "things progressed by contrasts" to his mature realization that, because such a theory "was building the world out of blocks," energy was created from "mere interplay and interaction." "Cross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, complements, giving and taking" are, for Stevens, "a source of pleasure" and of "harmony" (L 368).

[52]Both Rajeev Patke and Marjorie Perloff discuss the introduction of collage to the modernist period as a heralding of a new syntactic principle. As Perloff says, it offers "juxtaposition with explicit syntactic connection of disparate items" (The Dance of the Intellect 16). Yet they differ radically in their willingness to couple Stevens with this movement. Patke's claim that "Blue Guitar" is grounded on cubist and collage principles (78) would be countered by Perloff's adamant refusal to discuss Stevens in such terms, which she sees as uniquely applicable to the genius of Ezra Pound (15-17).

[53]For a more complete discussion of this tendency in Stevens read chapter two of Jacqueline Vaught Brogan's Stevens and Simile. Here she discusses metaphor as representative of one model of language used by Stevens to express his unitive theory of language. In her analysis, out of the conflict of a unitive theory of language and a fragmentation theory comes Stevens' arrival at the value of the simile, his priviledged third term that "[resolves] the latent tension of language" and "[sustains] both poles of language simultaneously" (21).

[54]As an example of the phenomenological desire to suppress the violence of alterity read Litz's comments on the opening section of "Blue Guitar": "The simplicity of this scene is deliberate, the 'green' of things as they are and the 'blue' of things imagined standing distinct and without sublety; and the simplicity of the debate between guitarist and audience is reinforced by the almost childish rhymes" (IV 239).

[55]My thinking on the mask radically contradicts Joseph Riddel's thinking in 1965: "Harmonium is a pastiche of masks or gestures, of acts which essentially add up to a self (or many faces and gestures of a self) in emergence, and in total to an act of self-discovery" (CE 272, emphasis mine).

CHAPTER IV

WOMAN/WRITING: "THE FINDING OF A SATISFACTION"

"The poet is a god, or the young poet is a god. The old poet is a tramp."

"Adagia" (OP 173)

"...time has been
Like water running in a gutter
Through an alley to nowhere,
Without beginning or the concept of an end"

"Five Grotesque Pieces" (OP 76)

I. The Long Affair: Lyric and Narrative Dimensions

It is hard to believe that the poet who wrote "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "Credences of Summer," "The Auroras of Autumn," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is well into his sixth decade, yet many critical readings make it equally hard to forget his increasing years. Helen Vendler's powerful evocation of an old poet's exhaustion has made forgetting virtually impossible: "In this ["An Ordinary Evening"], the harshest of all his experiments, Stevens deprives his poetry of all that the flesh, the sun, the earth, and the moon can offer, and, himself a skeleton, examines the bare possibilities of a skeletal life" (OEW 269).[1] What each of these long poems in turn achieve, however, is the revelation of Stevens' continued masculine virility, his potency to sustain the long form, to keep it going in time. Stevens' poetic prowess is not waning, but surging. The very length of these poems, together with their self-sustaining strength, is cause for celebration in his old age, not despair.

It may very well be that the aging Stevens is himself akin to the Secret Man, in the poem of the same name, who begrudgingly admits that "It is long since there have been doves/On any house of mine" (OP 35). If this is the case, given his old age and the attendant waning of desire as evident in the trope of the doves' absence, then Stevens, like the Secret Man, would testify that "It is better for me/In the rushes of autumn wind/To embrace autumn, without turning/To remember summer" (OP 36). But the long form to which Stevens repeatedly (re)turned in the 1940's is a form that cannot sit still, and he (re)turned to it again and again because he could not resist turning to remember summer. Whether or not it would have been "better" for him to accept the autumn wind which, as Bloom correctly asserts, "blow[s] one toward destruction" (PC 321), is immaterial. The point is that Stevens could not resist turning, away from the encroachment of death and toward the mysterious other--reality, the feminine. In these late long works, the reader can trace the attraction which the long form held for Stevens. Drawn repeatedly to it as a vessel for his ongoing mental processes, the feminized form draws repeatedly away from him, refusing to be a passive receptacle for his privileged thoughts. As writing, it refuses to privilege voice and, in its refusal, it teases the poet to talk on and on.

The progress of this affair occupies several poems. The poet's desire for the otherness that is reality is apparent by the end of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where the poet as young ephebe turns to embrace the full, still plump reality, his "Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night" (CP 406), for she is his mundo. This potentially destructive (because always disseminative) force teases the old man, just as Nanzia Nunzio forever speaks of the nakedness of her "burning body" (CP 395)

even though Ozymandias has yet to see her "take everything off." By "Credences of Summer," the Fat Girl has matured somewhat, and still the older poet leers after her, singing his lovesong to midsummer, hoping beyond hope, "with the hottest fire of sight" to see her in her "essential barrenness" (CP 373). Even in "The Auroras of Autumn" (when to speak of "the rushes of autumn wind" would be an understatement) Stevens turns to the woman. While she may now be a "hall harridan," she is spectacularly caressed by lights that flare like "a blaze of summer straw, in a winter's nick" (CP 421). But because desire is by definition "Always in emptiness that would be filled" (CP 467), the poet as lover turns away from his sought-after woman. By "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," he resignedly admits that "The wind has blown the silence of summer away" (CP 487), or, in other words, "every last thread of summer is at last unwoven" (CP 456). The autumnal winds cannot, however, unweave or blow away the Fat-girl-become-hall-harridan because she is not a solid. The woman, elusive reality, is invariably turned to again, but now she is "a shade that traverses/A dust, a force that traverses a shade" (CP 489). Stevens' long poems from 1942-1949 are anything but a simple resignation to autumnal demise. He will not go gently into that good night, nor will he rage. Rather he will twist and squirm and turn incessantly, back and forth. For although his summer-time frame of mind insists that "We seek/The poem of pure reality, untouched/By trope or deviation" (CP 471), the "true tone of the metal of winter" reminds him that all he can achieve is "The accent of deviation in the living thing/ That is its life preserved" (OP 96). Turning unresolvedly between the two--the memory of summer and the bite of autumn--Stevens keeps churning out the long form which must necessarily defer closure at all costs.

It constitutes, then, not "placid space," because the long poem is "not so blue as we thought" (CP 429). Blue, we remember, is Stevens' trope for lyric autotelism, as exemplified in the figures of the Blue Woman from "Notes" and the "man that plays the blue guitar." Blue is the colour of the lyric with its logocentric assumptions because "To be blue,/There must be no questions" (CP 429), since "blue infected will" (CP 40). The infection renders the lyric thin and slight. The narrative aspect of the long poem, on the other hand, is the "fluent mundo" or the fat girl gotten uncontrollably fatter, distorted and extended, blown-up, inflated almost beyond recognition. Yet beneath her enormousness one can still trace the familiar lines of her lyric aesthetic (markings which can never be wholly erased), just as one can recognize in the face of the fattest man his thin face, caught or trapped in the massive folds of flesh that recontextualize the smaller face, almost defacing it. The long poem is the conflict of the lean lyric voice caught in the massive folds of the narrative voices that form a new, almost overwhelming context. It is neither placid, nor blue, nor without questions. The old fattened Stevens was in love with this old fattened feminine form because it enabled him to turn: it gave him room to turn about.[2] The long form demanded "an intellect/Of windings round and dodges to and fro,/Windings in wrong obliques and distances" (CP 429-430). It could also bear the stormy weather of this long courtship ritual between the male lyric voice and the feminine, hence foreign, narrative--that is, reality.

Now, to say that the lyric voice fights to hold its own against the annihilatory forces of the narrative context is not the same as saying, as does Milton J. Bates in his Wallace Stevens that the "long sequences like 'An Ordinary Evening' allowed Stevens the latitude in which to develop and resolve his contrary

theses; hence this endlessly elaborating form was perhaps his most congenial medium" (292). Nor is it to say that "the theory of the lyric, rather than being antithetical to any notion of the long poem, indeed is the only theory of the long poem," as does Joseph Riddel ("A Somewhat Polemical Introduction" 466). The long poem is based on a radical difference that cannot be erased by saying either that it achieves dialectical resolution or that it is metaphorically healed because the long poem is the lyric in theory (the long form merely makes "explicit" what the short form does implicitly) (Riddel 467).

Lyric/narrative, masculine/feminine, monologic/dialogic, autumn/summer--this string of polarities is deprived of its authority due to the endless turning and the stream of supplementarity that is the long poem. Neither literal truth nor its multiple manifestations are able to be regarded as dialectically opposed because, in the whirlwind of the text's boundless reversals and substitutions, all distinctions collapse and truth starts to look like non-truth, non-truth like truth. The long poem is, as a result, both lyric and narrative, neither lyric nor narrative, and first lyric then narrative. Undecidability reigns supreme in this genre that defies generic categorization, necessarily.

Can his voice hold up in all this excitement? It is this question that haunts the aging poet. Can his masculine song seduce and, so doing, overwhelm reality, the feminine other? Or, if he is too old to possess her, has he the strength to push back against the pressure that is reality? Or, most terrifying of all, will he be paralyzed and undone by the presence/absence of "The dominant blank, the unapproachable" (CP 477), as is the scholar of one candle in the face of the flaring auroral lights?

The sheer number of long poems this late in Stevens' career and in such quick succession demonstrates his refusal to act the "amorist grown bald," for whom "amours shrink/In to the compass and curriculum/Of introspective exiles, lecturing." (CP 15). (The fear of shrinkage, replete with its sexual connotations, is terrifying for Stevens, who countervailed his fear by accumulating bulk--physically, in the body; aesthetically, in the long poem.) In defiance, Stevens becomes a comic figure akin to The Redwood Roamer of "Certain Phenomena of Sound": "a voice taller than the redwoods,/Engaged in the most prolific narrative" (CP 287). The lyric voice is engaged in and with the narrative context that is large, prolific, disseminative, and shifting. The same figure of commitment recurs in his prose: "We believe it [poetry] to be a vital engagement between the imagination and reality" (OP 239). The lyric lover sets out in each long poem in search of the lady, whom he hopes to subdue and penetrate. And although he will never have more of the bride than Ozymandias has, he is eternally committed to her, much like an unrequited Renaissance lover: "he [the poet] commits himself to reality, which then becomes his inescapable and ever-present difficulty and inamorata" (OP 238). She is his bride in a never-to-be consummated relationship.

But unlike the Canon Aspirin and the bride Stevens watches in Elizabeth Park, Hartford, who both make the error of imposing themselves on their respective scenes (CP 403; OP 239), the poet's bride is "the genius of poetry" who " creates her own locale as she goes along," since "She is the spirit of visible and invisible change" (OP 239). She is, as the epigraph to this chapter states, the nowhere towards which all the lines, images, words, and sounds rush, caught up as they are in the sweep of time. She is that which is without beginning or the concept of an

end. She is the murderess of the hermeneutic endeavour because she is the truth and the non-truth, the fact and its fiction, the lyric and the narrative. She alone, in the language of "Auroras of Autumn," is what can "unmake it"--"it" referring to the maniacal hold of the theo-philosophical notions of Truth and Being and Meaning, which have ossified into master concepts (this is "its jetted tragedy" [CP 417-418]). She slips out from under all of them, because she is the "flippant communication under the moon" (CP 418). She is what the metaphysical tradition wants to forget: she is woman.

II. A Nietzschian Interpreter: Playing Without Security

Stevens' love affair with reality in these late long poems is no longer burdened by the nostalgic belief that "the world is wide and yet...like a home," wherein "the world and the self...never become permanent strangers to one another" (Lukács 29). Strangeness, "the difficult difference" (CP 332), colours this world, making it "a narration/of incredible colors ex, ex and ex and out" (CP 347). In this context, a context coloured by the "unbelievable catastrophe" (L 343) of world war, man is left always the foreigner. Now it is increasingly harder than ever before "to sit in the garden and imagine that we were living in a world in which everything was as it ought to be" (L 423). So much "varnish and dirt" (L 426-427) has accumulated over the ages, that Stevens firmly reconciles himself to the fact that "we do not live in a land of Descartes" (L 433) but rather "a place/That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves" (CP 383). Much like Adam, the first poet-namer, Stevens slept and "woke in a metaphor," a "paradise malformed" (CP 331-332). The old world, the world depicted by Lukács, ended: "the book of reconciliation" (CP 345) was closed and "A new text of the world,/A scribble" (CP

494) was opened. At this point in Stevens' aesthetics, the "solar chariot" was already out with the "junk" (CP 332), and "the singular man" was left to face "the incalculably plural" (CP 340).

The world is now a "fluent mundo" (CP 407) no longer governed by "the solar single" (CP 280). It is a world seen in a new light--"an innate light,/The sun of Nietzsche" (CP 342). In "Description Without Place," Stevens' reflections on Nietzsche in canto IV focus on the enormous influence of Nietzschian thought on the modern world. Bent over the deep, dark pool of human history, Nietzsche's presence taints the sweeping discolorations in their "much-mottled motion," "gildering the swarm-like manias/In perpetual revolution, round and round..." (CP 342). The mind of Nietzsche is referred to in more disparaging terms in a letter to Henry Church: "In his mind one does not see the world more clearly; both of us must often have felt how a strong mind distorts the world" (L 431). Whether or not the strong mind distorts or "gilders" the world on which it meditates, too much Nietzsche is an intoxicating beverage: a little excites us, but too much throws us "out of focus" (L 432). Stevens then implies that we are already out of focus in the modern age because we cannot avoid the mind of Nietzsche. Twice in the course of four sentences Stevens posits the inescapability of Nietzschian philosophy:

> Of course, the answer to all this is that it is either his [Nietzsche's] kind of a mind or pretty much none. When I was at Wildensteins' I picked up several copies of the GAZETTE des BEAUX ARTS, which they are publishing now-a-days in English. Probably you wouldn't like it, but, after all, it is pretty much like Nietzsche's mind. If you don't like it, what is there to take its place? (L 432)

The world was, for Stevens, no longer Lukács' reality but Nietzsche's.

While Lukács' notion "lost its vitality" because in it "the imagination adheres to what is unreal" (NA 7), Nietzsche's reflections, like the painting "Wooden

Horses" in Stevens' essay, capture "a picture of ribald and hilarious reality...a picture wholly favorable to what is real" (NA 12). It is with relief that Nietzsche cheers as the last chapter of those "bishops' books/[that] Resolved the world" (CP 215) are closed. In this changed theatre, Nietzsche is the principal actor, imprisoned in his own mind:

> ...The actor is
> A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
> An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
> Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
> Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
> Beyond which it has no will to rise. (CP 240)

But what his mind has forced us to see is that, as Nietzsche writes in The Joyful Wisdom, "the world...has once more become 'infinite' to us: in so far we cannot dismiss the possibility that it contains infinite interpretations" (340). Reality is a text, in that the former can no more be interpreted and resolved than the latter. The very strangeness that Lukács suppresses, Nietzsche celebrates: one finds "a more comprehensive, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abysmally deep ground behind every ground, under every attempt to furnish 'grounds'" (Beyond Good and Evil 229). Just as "every word [is] also a mask" for Nietzsche (229), Stevens knows that our world "is a world of words to the end of it,/In which nothing solid is its solid self" (CP 345). Stevens has become a Nietzschian interpreter, in the Derridian sense.

A change in reality is similarly a change in imagination. In a post-Descartian world, the subject (the I "that thinks") is merely an empty construct, an habitual grammatical construct. In The Will to Power, Nietzsche explains:

> "There is thinking: therefore there is something that thinks": this is the upshot of all Descartes' argumentation. But that means positing as "true a priori" our belief in the concept of substance--that when there is thought there has to be something 'that thinks' is simply a

> formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed. In short, this is not merely the substantiation of a fact but a logical-metaphysical postulate--Along the lines followed by Descartes one does not come upon something absolutely certain but only upon the fact of a very strong belief. (268)

Then, in a particularly Stevensian fashion (to reverse the linearity of influence), Nietzsche presents and rejects two hypotheses for the subject before accepting the third: not (1) "one single subject" or (2) "a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general," but (3) "the subject as multiplicity" (WP 270). This subject is "not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is" (267). The concept of the "I" has now become an "habitual and indispensible...fiction" (268). Paul Jay, in Being in the Text, clears up one potential misconception in a reading of Nietzsche's critique of the self:

> Nietzsche's assertion...does not deny the fact of the subject's existence; it simply insists that the central fact about subjectivity is that its previous formulations have the status of a fiction, and that our own (particular and historical) role in creating that fiction must be acknowledged as more properly--and importantly--a "fact"...In Nietzsche's view, then, the notion that the self exists as a unified and pure spirit is contradicted by its purely discursive origins. (28-29)

Like Nietzsche, whose mind/thought permeates modern thinking, Stevens challenged all a priori truths as "provisional assumptions" (Nietzsche, WP 273). At the very moment the concept of "reality" was placed under quotations marks so, too, was the concept of "self."

It is not my intention at this time to provide a synopsis of Stevens' (recurrently denied) "relationship" with Nietzsche, a project that has been handled thoroughly by Milton J. Bates, who has focused on the relationship of Stevens' "major man" and Nietzsche's Übermënsch in the years 1936-1947.[3] And lest we

"by seeking the beginnings of things...[become] a crab" (Nietzsche, Idols 4), let me emphasize one last time that Nietzsche's influence was such that the world became a world of interpretation rather than origination, and the self became "the term for our belief in a unity underlying all the different impulses of the highest feeling of reality" (WP 268). History, for both poet and philosopher, is constituted by "the origin and end of eras of human belief" (OP 205), to quote Stevens. Consequently, fundamental "truths" are now reduced to "provisional assumptions," or what Nietzsche calls "very well acquired habit[s] of belief" (WP 273). The provisionality of such terms as "Being," "Truth" and "Reality" is accented by the grammatical function of the quotation marks, which emphasizes that they are not ontological givens or master concepts but the constructs of historically created assumptions and ideologies.

Once we accept the father/philosopher's teaching that "Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live" (WP 272), we arrive at the conclusion drawn by the son/poet: "This is the same thing as saying that it might be possible for us to believe in something that we know to be untrue. Of course, we do that every day, but we don't make the most of the fact that we do it out of the need to believe, what in your day, and mine, in Cambridge was called the will to believe" (L 443). What we currently will to believe in, Stevens argues, is the poet who speaks a different truth. We validate his aesthetic, whereas we countermanded that of the gods, because the violence and force of his poetic imagination is such that "he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (NA 31). That it is poetry which replaces the toppled

gods of a bygone imaginative era is because "we believe it to be a vital engagement between the imagination and reality" (OP 238-239, emphasis mine). His "potency" (Stevens' figure) is contingent upon the degree of his belief: "We can never have great poetry unless we believe that poetry serves great ends...it will affect everything that we do. Our belief in the greatness of poetry is a vital part of its greatness, an implicit part of the belief of others in its greatness" (OP 243). It can, in fact, be a lie.

The supposed dichotomy between truth and the lie is collapsed, in Nietzschian thinking particularly. Belief in fictions is necessary and inescapable and not unique to our era, for have we not always believed the lies of metaphysics, science and religion (WP 451)? Not only do we need lies "in order to conquer this reality, this 'truth,' that is, in order to live" (WP 451)--recall Nietzsche's famous aphorism "We possess art lest we perish of the truth" (WP 435)--but we need the artist, "a liar by nature" (WP 451). The artist, who affirms nothing as Sidney stressed, is he who helps us to live in our world. He is the "force" celebrated by both the poet and the philosopher: "We have created the world that possesses values! Knowing this, we know, too, that reverence for truth is already the consequence of an illusion--and that one should value more than truth the force that forms, simplifies, shapes, invents" (WP 326).[4] Because "Truth is ugly" (WP 435) and the "real world" is "false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning" (WP 451), the artist's fictions or lies are absolutely necessary in order to live in the world. That this is the case is, for Nietzsche, "itself part of the terrifying and questionable character of existence" (WP 457), though he adds that to prefer "the questionable and terrifying" is a sign of one's strength and power (450). The

closeness of these selections from Nietzsche to the Stevens of the late essays is uncanny, given Stevens' insistence in 1942 that he had not read Nietzsche since he was a young man (L 409) and that he thought very little of Human, All too Human which he read in 1944 (L 462). In the back of one's mind, nevertheless, one hears Stevens' words to Henry Church in 1946, as he encourages him to visit Basel because "I am more and more constantly interested in Basel than in Jerusalem. Then, too, you can walk there in Nietzsche's footsteps" (L 532).

Walking in Nietzsche's footsteps as opposed to a Christian God's means, for Derrida, to affirm play because "truth does not count as the supreme value" (WP 453), as it did in the metaphysical era of the "Book." "The will to appearance, to illusion, to deception, to becoming and change...," for Nietzsche, "here counts as a more profound, primeval, 'metaphysical' than the will to truth, to reality, to mere appearance" (WP 453). Pleasure is "the will to become, grow, shape, ie., to create" (WP 453), and it reaches back to "a muddy centre before we breathed" (CP 383). Not a place of truth, but more metaphysical than truth, this place of pleasure, change, illusion, and becoming is the site from which the poem "springs" (CP 383). To approach this site as a weak interpreter is to "interpret their own value feelings into it" and, rather than face its terror, to seek "some sort of 'solution' at the end" (WP 450). But to approach "the questionable and terrifying" with Nietzschean power and affirmation is to prefer its very impenetrability. Rather than transform the unknown into the known, such a reader proceeds without recourse to or desire for éclaircissement upon conclusion. The capacity to face radical alterity devoid of any stabilizing ground (remember, "the muddy center" can swallow one up) is a mark of one's power.

What "saves" the artist from the cavernous hole that is the site of poetry, a place of terror and pleasure, is his power to lie. The artist, writes Nietzsche, "enjoys the lie as his source of power" (WP 542). The continuous play of metaphysical substitution is the continuous play of displacement and deferral of arrival. The centre of all poetic activity is a non-center. In "A Primitive Like Orb," Stevens does not arrive at a stable center, "The essential poem at the centre of things" from which springs all lesser poems (CP 440). All poems--"The total/Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods/Of color"--reach down and touch--nothingness. At the heart of poetic activity, he finds not origin but interpretation, not a still point but an abyss; he finds "the giant of nothingness, each one [each lesser poem]/And the giant ever changing, living in change" (CP 443). In these words we hear the echo of Derrida's definition of the Nietzschian interpreter: "this is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of the play of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin...it play without security...[and] surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace" (WP 292). Stevens has awakened from the Rousseauistic dream of an origin or truth beyond play and the lie; he has, like Adam, wakened to a "new text of the world" (CP 494), one which is riddled with "a constant secondariness" (CP 506).

In his newly orphaned state, his only guide comes not with "tepid aureole/Or stars that follow," as is the case with the metaphysical angels referred to in "Angel Surrounded By Paysans." His new angel is of his very substance and, so perfectly reflects the commonplace context (evident in the trope of the paysans) in which he lives. He is metaphor itself, half reality and half imagination but always fully

provisional:

> ...Am I not,
> Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,
>
> A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
> Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in
>
> Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
> Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone? (CP 497)

The angel of reality purifies the earth, which eventually becomes "overfull/Of wormy metaphors" (CP 162), by constantly turning, changing, playing. Likewise, his earlier counterpart, the angel in "Notes," remains suspended above "the violent abyss" upon which he is "Serenely gazing." A player without security, this angel "leaps downward through evening's revelations" without the metaphysical need of solid ground: he "needs nothing but deep space" (CP 404). In this "leap of faith," a leap through chaos like Milton's Satan, the angel affirms a fictive world without truth. In "the motionless motion of his flight," the angel "Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny" (CP 404). The angel, traditionally aligned with man's most cherished transcendental impulses, is here distinctly subverted: he mirrors not the still consolations of heaven's comforts but the pleasure that attends the mind's free-fall into the fictive realm.

The angelic dance of continuous deferral and substitution is carefully distinguished from the tedious, unchanging repetition of the robin, wren, and jay's "idiot minstrelsy" in "Notes" (CP 394). Rather than "practicing/Mere repetitions" (CP 405), his is a dance which affirms "the vast repetitions" as a good:

> ...good, the going round
>
> And round and round, the merely going round,
> Until merely going round is a final good. (CP 405)

Just as the angel can keep everything going round, lest it settle and become part of the credible, so too can the vital poet: "I can/Do all that angels can" (CP 405). A master of repetition, the capable poet can see the world in difference; he can read the text of the world for difference. Again, the angelic guide of this new poet is not the trope of presence it was for his forefathers but yet another trope of absence. It is the stream of "reflections" that emanate from the poet's mind in an attempt to fill the "external regions" (CP 405) left empty by the gods who could no longer adapt to reality. Having subverted his inherited and habitual modes of thought, the new poet now reimagines the angel as a "mirror of the self" (CP 405), and the self as a mirror of its context.[5]

Inadvertently, the angel of reality can be traced to the Fat Girl, who is "a moving contour, a change not quite completed," both known and not known, "familiar yet an aberration" (CP 406). The poet has learned from the angel how to read this world of difference. In these late long poems, Stevens proceeds to face this difference free of any metaphysical hankering to tie it down or to resolve it. His ability to feel pleasure in the act of contemplating the figure of the angel in its terrifying freefall is extended to appreciatio. of the full figure of the earth. The Fat Girl's capacity to excite the poet and to give pleasure is due to her coquettishness: her ability to slip out from under him. Even when he feels the "unprovoked sensation" to "Check [her] evasions," she becomes again "the soft-footed phantom" (CP 406) that eludes him. She is the strangeness that Nietzsche (and belatedly, Stevens) affirms and celebrates. She is the "miraculous multiplex" (CP 442), that contains "infinite interruptions," to allude to Nietzsche again: the earth, reality, the feminine, the "narrative of incredible colors" (CP 347), the angel of reality, the

summer, the "incalculably plural" (CP 340), the rock, the "heavy difference" (CP 263), the paramour, in an endless stream of metaphorical substitution without origin or end.

III. The Folds of the Fat Girl

"One lies well when one loves," Nietzsche wrote in The Will to Power (426), and no one loves the Fat Girl with her unfathomable folds more than Stevens. But, as he states in the concluding stanza of "A Primitive Like an Orb," the "fated eccentricity" of the lover is that he "writes" (CP 443). Being not a wearied old man, but an aged lover throwing himself pitilessly at the feet of the Fat girl, Stevens begins (again and again) a barrage of long poems that defer arrival, postpone lyric completion (and likely depletion). and defy narrative logic and lineation. These poems become a continuous writing, giants that live in change. Although Stevens wrote in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" that while "the end of the philosopher is despair, the end of the poet is fulfillment" (NA 43), the poet/lover can never fulfill his desire: he can never stop writing. To put a halt to the writing, to end the love poem, is to achieve climax. For the lover, the writing (the lie) must be sustained--it is a mark of one's virility. Yet countering the narrative desire to keep the writing going is the lyric desire to stop the (fore)play so as to achieve the sought-after conclusion with its attendant satisfaction and relief. The desire to reach the center, the innermost fold of the Fat Girl, is the haunting desire of the poet-lover of the long poem, yet it is a desire that the male who prides his potency must suppress. As long as he continually thinks of something "other" than the point which will grant him arrival at the center, something a little to side of the mark, he can create a sustained delay--always desiring fulfillment by

never succumbing to it. Stevens himself uses the sensual metaphor of teasing to elicit the problematical metaphysical center: the very activity of writing (especially the long poem, I would add) is an experience which leads the poet to "think of poetry as possibly a phase of metaphysics; and it must be this experience that teases him with that sense of the possibility of a remote, a mystical vis or noeud vital" (NA 49). This center is for Stevens "the most furtive fiction" (CP 93). Lost in the folds of the Fat Girl, the poet-lover keeps writing, having resigned himself to the fact that he will never achieve fulfillment. Yet now, playing in her folds--like watching the angel of reality freefall into the abyss--is a pleasure.[6]

Neither purely lyric nor narrative, neither male phallus nor female hymen, neither their polarity nor their marriage--the long poem is a site of writing. The long poem is this sexual difference. In her introduction to Of Grammatology, Gayatri Spivak explains Derrida's phallocentric and hymeneal "fables of meaning" regarding his version of textuality:

> Into the (n)ever-virgin, (n)ever-violated hymen of inter-pretation, always supplementing through its fold which is also an opening, is spilled the seed of meaning; a seed that scatters itself abroad rather than inseminates. Or, turning the terms around, the playfully disseminating rather than proprietorially hermeneutic gesture of interpretation (n)ever penetrates the hymen of the text. It is a sexual union forever deferred. (lxvi)

On the one hand, the long poem is equally a dissemination ("not an exact and controlled polysemy, but a proliferation of always different, always postponed meanings" [lxv]) and, on the other, an intricately folded hymen ("the always folded [therefore never single or simple] space in which the pen writes its dissemination" [lxvi]).[7] As writing, this (non)genre deconstructs the notion of the center, replacing it with the notion of supplementarity, whose freeplay is akin to the angel of

reality's freefall: "this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin, is the movement of supplementarity" (Derrida, WD 289). The always absent center is always replaced by a sign, which "supplement[s] a lack on the part of the signified" (289). The writing is a scattering; it is the Arabian from "Notes" with "his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how" which "Inscribes a primitive astronomy," as he "throws his stars around the floor" (CP 383). Dissolution, breakage, without origin or conclusion--the long poem works without genre.

And yet, the long poem has been traditionally interpreted as a receptacle, a hollow vessel, into which the male voice can pour his desire (for meaning, truth, self-identity). The critical tradition has repeatedly reinforced this stereotypical gender bias: male poetic voice gives and the feminized poetic long form receives. Inadvertently, Stevens contributes to this understanding of the long poem: he sees it as the passive accumulation of his lyrical responses to daily reality. As late as 1949 Stevens upheld that the long poem is "merely a collection of short ones" that goes "on and on" (L 640, emphasis mine). And again, "It is much easier to make progress on a single long poem, in which one goes ahead pretty much as one talks, as one thing leads to another" (L 648). The poet's willingness to "let one thing lead to another" is delightfully sexual and teasingly phallocentric, just as the style of the poem is. Spivak sums up the phallocentric style in the cliché "'the style is the man'": since "his style remains obliged to depend upon the stylus or stiletto of the phallus," "his pen must write or prove impotent."[8] Seen in the context of this gender biased reading of style, Stevens' words in "One or Two Ideas" now don a different connotation:

> Style is not something applied. It is something inherent, something that permeates. It is of the nature of that in which it is found, whether the poem, the manner of a god, the bearing of a man. It is

> not a dress. It may be said to be a voice that is inevitable. A man has no choice about his style. When he says I am my style the truth reminds him that it is his style that is himself. (OP 210-211, emphasis mine)

What is curious about Stevens is that when he talks about the lyric he feminizes his function as a lyric poet. As he writes to his future wife in 1913,

> Keep all this a great secret. There is something absurd about all this writing of verses; but the truth is, it elates and satisfies me to do it. It is an all-round exercise quite superior to ordinary reading. So that, you see, my habits are positively lady-like. (L 180)

As a verse (lyric) writer, his style permeates him and, being at one with his style, he is made lady-like just as is the genre he practices. Perhaps Frank Lentricchia is correct when he writes that the writing of verse was absurd to Stevens because it placed him "at odds with his maleness--the feeling of the sexual other within, in the mask of poetic culture: the lady poet" ("Patriarchy Against Itself" 745). About this letter, Lentricchia wants to argue that "without even a gesture of argument the heavy fact of male literary authority is simply set aside" (744). But Stevens was in 1913 merely a fledgling poet who, for years to follow, wrote chiefly lyric poems.

In his maturation, Stevens became a writer of the long poem; and when he speaks of the poet of the long poem, the gender-bias of his language becomes distinctly masculine, as if one can only enter the ranks of (male) literary authority when one can write the great epic of earth. Stevens' poetics of the lyric or the long poem differs in a way that manifests itself in a gender-oriented interpretation. In writing the long poem Stevens practices a masculine poetics of endurance, virility, and potency. In his eyes the long poem was expansive enough and flexible enough to bear the "miscellany" of his thoughts (L 430) or "the drift of one's ideas" (L 636)--the prostitute with the golden heart, infinitely silent and patient and

uncomplaining.

The hierarchical self-privileging that takes place here in terms of genre/gender could be attributed to Nietzsche. The philosopher felt that "one ought not to demand of the artist, who gives, that he should become a woman--that he should receive" (WP 429). For examples in Stevens of the artist as the "potent figure" who "gives" recall "The Noble Rider" essay, "he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it (NA 31); the "Adagia," the poet is "to give a sense of the freshness or vividness of life" (OP 157); and the "Effects of Analogy," the poet gives us "his sense of the world" (NA 121).[9] Because of his recurrent insistence upon the figure of the poet as giver, Stevens inadvertently posits the masculine voice as the privileged discourse over the feminine form that merely provides the container for his thoughts. His language itself betrays his masculine poetics of the long poetic form. But the feminization of the long poetic genre is something which is outside of his will or intention, as well as his power to control.

Yet, despite the poet's desire to engender Truth or Being, what the male voice cannot subdue and so incorporate is the feminized form. Unlike the male, the female is capable of lying, particularly by faking orgasm or feigning the presence of sexual pleasure in its absence (Spivak 170). Stevens hoped that the "very length" of the long poem would create the emotional effect desired by the poet: the effect he desired was that it would tolerate "so many emotions, so many sensations... stirred up into activity" (NA 111). The very concept of length, itself, is problematical because the long poem sustains its length by repeatedly feigning climax or resolution. What the long poem ultimately "stirs up" is the repressed or

the excluded: what it stirs up is woman, and woman as writing. The long poem is the site of this contention between the masculine voice, which is monological, and this feminized form or writing, which is dialogical. Although this masculine poet looked upon the long poem genre as an ever-receptive woman (a traditionalist notion which was certainly enticing to Stevens), he had yet to discover that the emergence of her otherness brings not domesticity but chaos. Rather than create a homogeneous unity among all that is poured into her, as writing she broadcasts (not hushes) the gaps between what is told and the telling of it. In her context (which is outside of the rational structure of subjectivity), the lyric voice is no longer the privileged discourse; therefore, it can no longer balance or control all the conflictual elements in the poem.

Woman, love, the muddy centre--from these things the long poem springs. They are tropes for that which is beyond reason and that which exceeds language. They are the nothing to which the long alley (long poem) leads us; they are irreducible as well as without origin or end. As a trope, woman is the irreducible exteriority of difference that fissures each long poem, each "text of life" (NA 76), rendering any certainty of interpretation impossible. In the terminology of "Notes," she is the abstract "immaculate beginning" (CP 382) and the "inexhaustible being" of continuous change. Being both "that ever-early candor" and "its late plural," and neither an earliness nor a lateness, she is, rather, an otherness that cannot be mastered. Just as she is she gives pleasure, "the way a leaf/Above the table spins its constant spin,/So that we look at it with pleasure, look/At it spinning its eccentric measure" (CP 407). Her "presence" destabilizes the male voice.

Continued critical repression of woman/writing has led critics repeatedly to valorize the hierarchically sanctioned male voice and vision. Marjorie Perloff belatedly replicates the same song as Bloom, Vendler, Litz, Doggett...:

> For Stevens, however, poetry always remains lyric poetry, as late Romantic theory (if not always the poetry) had defined it--the poem as short verse utterance (or sequence of such utterances) in which a single speaker expresses in figurative language, his subjective vision of truth, a truth culminating in a unique insight or epiphany that unites poet and reader...Stevens is at his most assured, I would argue, when he makes no gesture toward the world of 'prose reality'--the world of 'what is direct and immediate and real,' which he finds so distasteful" ("The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of the Modernist Lyric" 51)

To read for the difference, however, is to release the repressed woman out from under "the effortless and inescapable process of [the poet's] own individuality" (NA 46). Because the long poetic form instructs us to read for the "heavy difference" (CP 263) or the fat girl, we become ourselves "Thinkers without final thoughts" (OP 115). Like the poetic self at the center of the poetic act, we cannot, in the activity of reading, mediate between male and female, being and nothingness, lyric and narrative. Difference cannot be domesticated. What Stevens learns in these late long poems is exactly what Crispin learned some twenty years earlier: women introduce only a welcoming chaos.

As with sexual foreplay, the act of writing a long poem is thus a process whereby "one thing leads to another" (L 648), to quote Stevens. In order to become "Engaged in the most prolific narrative" (CP 287), "A larger poem for a larger audience" (CP 465), the poet as lover must bid farewell to any ideas of exactly where he wants this relationship to go. As he writes in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the poet must "fling [himself], constantly longing, on this form" (CP 470). Canto II of "The Auroras" could be read as a self-reflexive

moment as the poet faces exactly what it means to be a writer of the long poem. An incredible severity lies at the base of the opening words, "Farewell to an idea..." (CP 412), as the words themselves drop into the abyss of the ellipsis. Without the consolation of an idea to guide the poetic activity, the poetic form itself becomes an empty architectural structure. The poet is left alone to face an endless expanse of whiteness, pages and pages of terrifyingly blank white sheets. To fill these pages with words, to write a long poem, is "the accomplishment/Of an extremist in an exercise..." (CP 412). It demands that he weather the seasonal changes and the gathering darkness as "The long lines of it grow longer, emptier" (CP 412). Blowing throughout the broad blank expanse of the long poem is the wind, "blowing the sand across the floor" (CP 412) in a wealth of shifting rhetorical patterns. "The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand" describes the poet figure.[10] Neither impotent nor sterile, he is still able imaginatively to turn aimlessly in the continuously disseminating sand: because he is blank or void of fixed ideas that would paralyze him.[11] As the man on the vast expanse of empty beach turns to witness the effervescent play of the colourful aurora borealis in the northern sky, the poet of the long form, in his turning, comes to partake in a similar play of continuous figurative change.

The insistent whiteness, which is chilling and foreboding in canto II of "The Auroras," is aligned with the solid and the visible. The poet's difficulty of facing this whiteness is again referred to in canto XII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Here we witness the ephebe alone in his walk, as he seeks out "a fresh spiritual that he defines" (CP 474) in three noun phrases: "a coldness in a long, too-constant warmth," "A thing on the side of a house," and "A difficulty that we

predicate" (474). The "difficulty" that we are to affirm is "the difficulty of the visible," the actual (landscape, horns, baker, butcher). The vast whiteness in which the long poet finds himself is the endless succession of blank leaves of paper and the impoverished, vacuous world in which we live. For the poet, the difficulty of "being of the solid of white" (CP 412) is the difficulty of facing this stupefying blankness and trying to make a "never-ending meditation" (L 465) out of it.

And if the poet ever tires of his unfulfilled love affair with reality--because of his recognition that, regardless of what he does, "A blank underlies the trials of device" (CP 477)--he is suddenly brought up short. This lover who may have temporarily lost interest is brought back to his loved one instantly:

> Life fixed him, wandering on the stair of glass,
> With its attentive eyes. And, as he stood,
> On his balcony, outsensing distances,
>
> These were looks that caught him out of empty air.
> C'est toujours la vie que me regarde...This was
> Who watched him, always, for unfaithful thought.
>
> This sat beside his bed, with its guitar,
> To keep him from forgetting, without a word,
> A note or two disclosing who it was. (CP 483)[12]

The love affair of the long poet is inescapable. Either he throws himself upon her form with complete abandon or he attempts, as did the Canon Aspirin in "Notes," to "[impose] orders as he thinks of them" (CP 403) and, hence, becomes a failed poet.

The reward for being a faithful lover of reality is made apparent in the closing stanza of canto X in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." The radical undecidability of the world in which we live--"We do not know what is real and what is not" (CP 472)--is not only difficult to live in but also demanding. If the poet/lover can sustain "faithfulness" in its plurality, "as against the lunar light" of

fixed thought, he will ultimately be granted the satisfaction of incredible pleasure: "This faithfulness of reality, this mode./This tendance and venerable holding-in/Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces" (CP 472). To repeat the error of the Canon Aspirin is to fail to see "The enigmatical/Beauty of each beautiful enigma"; it is to become "haunted by the man/Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died" (CP 472). Faithfulness does indeed have its rewards, for when "The phrase grows weak[,] The fact takes up the strength/Of the phrase" (CP 473). But it also has its price.

The price that the poet must pay is the price of being left to wander as a foreigner in "a place/That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves" (CP 383). He will even have to face times when "There are no lines to speak? There is no play" (CP 416). But in these late long poems, the poet is far less terrified of possible silence than ever before. No longer questing for a way home (to the consolations of meaning and truth), he accepts that he lives "In the midst of foreignness" (CP 471) and that it has an incredible attraction for him: "We keep coming back and coming back/To the real" (CP 471). His love poems to and on reality will go "on and on" (L 640) in a never-ending narrative composed of "A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet" (CP 465). Yet while the poet may be all the while wandering in error, uncertain of where he is headed, he wishes only to keep going:

> ...I have no wish to arrive at a conclusion. Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that.
>
> (L 710)

Despite his having been abandoned in "the celestial ennui of apartments" (CP 381),

rooms with attic windows (CP 384), and a hotel room in New Haven (CP 471), the poet, driven by a need, roams tirelessly in pursuit of the lady. As the poet of "Notes" admits "so poisonous/Are the ravishments of the truth" (CP 381), but the poison works laggardly, slowly, and, strange to say, pleasurably.

The experience of reading/writing the long poem is, by extension, that of tracking time which is "Like water running in a gutter/Through an alley to nowhere" (to recall our epigraph, [OP 76]) or that of walking through the "leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings/ Around and away" (CP 474). The figure of the gutter--a long, empty container, waiting to be filled, then just as quickly emptied--works aptly for the long poetic form. What falls into the gutter/long poem and what it ultimately attempts to resemble is "the whole psychology," which Stevens himself defines as "the self,/The town, the weather, in a casual litter,/Together" (CP 474). But even this late in his career, Stevens sees himself as something of a novice when it comes to handling the "casual litter" in poetic form. Being "an extremist in an exercise," he has "elected" himself "to exercise his power to the full and at its height," to use Stevens' own choice of words from "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" (NA 63). Having elected himself to exercise his power of the imagination, the poet/ephebe has to practice his exercises carefully: only now may he "begin its exercise by studying it in exercise and proceed little by little, as he becomes his own master, to those violences which are the maturity of his desires" (NA 63-64). The aging Stevens as young ephebe-lover-poet must keep his lessons in mind, and it is these lessons, these exercises, which bring us back to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

When "Notes" opens it is not surprising to find the poet alone with his lesson book--"The extremist book of the wisest man" (CP 380)-- pressed close to his chest. The lessons which he must learn, having in his late age elected himself to be a "noteworthy" poet, are subdivided into three main exercises. Like a Jesuit novice slowly proceeding through the Ignation spiritual meditations, the ephebe-poet proceeds through the exercises of Abstraction, Change, and Pleasure, with the intention of ultimately being initiated into the realm of the male master-poets.[13] Only when he is aware of the "precious portents" of his own power (NA 175), his own capacity for violence, will he be through with his studies. Then he will be able "to play man number one,/To drive the dagger in his heart" (CP 166). For now, however, the poet figure is "That scholar hungriest for that book,/The very book, or less, a page./Or, at the least, a phrase" (CP 178). His hunger, which is also a sexual hunger, stems from the fact that these "missal" meditations[14] lead him not toward a dead or dying God, but step-by-step toward the fat girl.

This major long poem in Stevens' canon is, then, a writing which is actually a reading. The reading begins with the first canto of the first chapter "It Must Be Abstract": "Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea..." (CP 380), "Never suppose an inventing mind at source" (CP 381), "Phoebus is dead, ephebe" (CP 381), "The sun/Must bear no name" (and here the old master slips in his own writings and erroneously provides an out-dated conceit, "gold flourishes," which flies in the face of his own teachings) (CP 381), and so forth. When the "prodigious scholar" (CP 381) has finished the process of reading and experiencing his three meditations, he is converted to its unorthodox teaching and in love with its most elusive goal--the fat girl. It is at this moment--at the end of his lessons--that he writes his love lyric

which appears at the beginning of the lessons (making it appear as though it temporally antedates the lessons themselves). The "you" to which the poet addresses the question "And for what, except for you, do I feel love?" (CP 380) is the lesson book by the wisest man, a text which the ephebe has completely absorbed into himself until it is "hidden in me day and night." And, by extension, it is the fat girl who is reality, the object of the lessons. The "you" is not his muse, his mother, or his friend Henry Church, (Stevens asks "for what," not "for whom") but the textbook that has taught this eager scholar exactly what will be his task as a major poet to seek. So, when, the lessons have ended and the ephebe has earned the right to address the fat girl (CP 407), he closes the text and is awash in a "vivid transcendence" and a "peace" (CP 381), that is momentarily uplifting for him. In this opening octave Stevens is not writing a love song to his own poem, as Bloom argues (PC 168), but to a text external to his, an alien text that equipped him with a key and a model for his own major poems to follow.

The import of the Notes that the ephebe studies is to seek and embrace, rather than fear, the "irrational distortion," the "difference," the "aberration"--the woman--that disrupts every attempt to "get it straight" (CP 406). Time and time again thereafter, he reminds himself that "In this identity, disembodiments/Still keep occurring" (CP 482); as a result, he can only write "Words, lines, not meanings, not communications" (CP 465). But the "casual litter" of tropes that make up each long poem are not "waster figurations" (CP 477), because their eccentric substitution without end is the prolongation of desire. Desire (and writing) is kept whetted as long as it is kept continually seeking and, hence, continually frustrated. On the issue of desire and passion we need to listen to Stevens and then to Derrida:

"What is, uncertainly,/Desire prolongs its adventure to create/Forms of farewell, furtive among green ferns" (CP 482); "Now, the book has lived on this lure: to have given us to believe that passion, having originally been impassioned by something, could in the end be appeased by the return of that something. Lure of the origin, the end, the line, the ring, the volume, the center" (WD 295). The long poem is perpetually caught on this doubleness: the male poet's desire for lyric domination and the feminized form's repeated titillation and narrational evasion.

The experience of the "Notes" teaches the ephebe that his desire, his writing, and woman are inextricably entangled. He learns what an even later master, Derrida, wrote of some thirty years later: what Stevens calls the "adventure" of writing a long poem is "the seminal adventure of the trace" (WD 292) for Derrida. Its continual dissemination is the "producing a nonfinite number of semantic effects, [that] can be led back neither to a present of simple origin...nor to an eschatological presence. It marks an irreducible and generative multiplicity. The supplement and the turbulence of a certain lack fractures the limit of the text, forbidding an exhaustive and closed formalization of it, or at least a saturating taxonomy of its themes, its signified, its meaning" (Positions 45). The model of woman infiltrates the scholar's cherished notes because she is the perpetually desired and yet impenetrable ideal of the First Idea in its abstraction, as well as its desired eradication or change in the Supreme Fiction. Hence, she is a pleasure which is not the result of dialectical resolution or synthesis. The irreconcilable division or wound that marks woman (the sexual differential between the male penis and the female clitoris) permeates Stevens' own discourse on the Supreme Fiction:

> I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take. The NOTES start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract. Of course, in the long run, poetry would be the

> supreme fiction; the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure. (L 430)

Woman as abstraction and as pleasure via change serves to motivate and disrupt Stevens' poetics at its very core--the notion of a Supreme Fiction. She alone is and governs the realm of the long poetic form. In the context of her presence/absence, the male lyric poet becomes "the scholar of one candle" who "feels afraid" (CP 417), for she sets his house (long poem, body) on fire, a classic Petrarchan trope of an unsatisfiable passion.[15]

"Notes" is a lesson in desire, writing, and woman, taught in three stages under the subtitles Abstract, Change, and Pleasure. In each of Stevens' late long poems, he attempts the application of one of his lessons: Abstraction and "Credences of Summer," Change and "The Auroras of Autumn," Pleasure and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Each is an extended and rigorous exercise based on his meditations from "Notes." Although "Notes" is not the total building, it is a collection of materials for that building," as Joseph Carroll states in Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction (160). While the "Notes" may be a "miscellany" without a discernable theoretical backbone (L 430-431)--most reminiscent of Professor Teufelsdröckh's six preciously sealed and successively marked paper bags filled with shreds and bits of barely legible writing[16]--the last long poems constitute anything but a "total building." Consequently, although Stevens feels that "In the case of a long thing, one goes ahead under the impetus of a single subject" (L 647) (Abstract, Change, Pleasure), and although he "[does] seek a centre and expect[s] to go on seeking it" even knowing he will never find it (L 584), these long "things" that materialize are not, ultimately, hermeneutically-sealed, organic structures.

Instead they give way to an ungovernable excessiveness that overwhelms the

male lyric voice. Not one of Stevens' principle images--not the Fat Girl, the rock of summer, the serpent, the auroras, or the ordinary evening--can be stabilized or made present. They represent only "that which is distilled/In the prolific ellipses" (NA 87). Being a "prolific ellipsis," a long poem still points to these marks or images so as to emphasize that they are only the traces of an absent presence (something has been excised from the text) which goes on and on indefinitely. Despite the male wish-fantasy to be the sovereign master of one's own reality--the "mighty imagination" of "Puella Parvula" who can say that "Every thread of summer is at last unwoven" (CP 456)--the best he can accomplish in the context of feminine reality is to be the master of repetitions (CP 406). She is the lure that leads the lyric voice seemingly toward truth, but hers is "a decoying voice" (OP 35). Each of his attempts to get "straight to the transfixing object" (CP 471)--the Fat Girl, rock, auroras, ordinary evening--is thwarted by her. Etymologically, the word "decoy" points not only to the lure itself (woman) but also to the place of danger into which the game is tricked (woman as long poem): the Latin "cavea" or "cavus" means the empty hollow. Her voice, which is the "companies of voices" (CP 398) moving through the long hollow poem, is one enormous evasion: she is the "Beau linguist" (CP 387) or "The gaiety of language [that] is our seigneur" (CP 322).

Still, to be the master of his situation, the male poet resumes fantasizing of his marriage with woman in idealistic terms that evoke a Platonic sense of equality, whereby two halves become one whole. In canto IV of "It Must Change," he stresses the interdependency of opposites: male/female, day/night, imagined/real (CP 392). But as Bloom notes, this difference will be healed over by their love, which

will give birth to change (PC 193). Equality is, however, undone by the end of the canto, because the poet automatically assumes the elitist privileging of the male over the female. In a masculine Whitmanian manner, he notes that the poet's lyric voice will incorporate all, take all into itself: "A little string speaks for a crowd of voices" (CP 392). Then we see him commanding and leading the way:

> The captain and his men
> Are one and the sailor and the sea are one.
> Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,
> Sister and solace, brother and delight. (CP 392)

But in the context of the long poem the habitual gender-genre hierarchy is inverted. The male lyric voice is not leading us anywhere (not toward resolution or meaning), for he is actually following woman's deviations or evasions (OP 96; CP 396) "Without understanding" (CP 310).

The great lesson at the end of "Notes" is that the poet-lover must accept his own secondariness to the "myth before the myth began" (CP 383), even as he sustains the myth that he is our guide and leader. That he can only follow woman/reality makes his writing not a creation but "One of the vast repetitions final in/Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round/And round and round, the merely going round" (CP 405). The hierarchical inversion enacted in the long poem humbles him: to be a master, he can only and always be a good student who must realize that "These things at least comprise/An occupation, an exercise, a work" (CP 405)--a long poem.

The student's first extended exercise in the problematic of Abstraction is "Credences of Summer." What the meditative "Notes" on Abstraction teach Stevens is that

> The poem refreshes life so that we share,
> For a moment, the first idea...It satisfies

> Belief in an immaculate beginning
>
> And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
> To an immaculate end. We move between these points:
> From an ever-early candor to its late plural. (CP 382)

Because the enticements of truth are so deadly "poisonous," "the first idea becomes/The hermit in a poet's metaphors" (CP 381), metaphors which are designed to conceal reality as opposed to reveal it. The first idea can, then, only be perceived in its disguised form, wandering about incognito all day long. If we try to rout out its origin, we too are sent wandering. Our world presents us with the figure of the man in pantaloons (canto X); and before him we have the major man (canto IX); and before him we have the MacCullough who thinks about the thinker of the first idea (canto VIII); and, before him, the giant or thinker of the first idea (canto VII); and, before him, the mere weather (canto VI). Even if our quest for origin or firstness takes us as far back as the sun, we reach only a name ("gold flourisher"), which is historically preceded by an earlier name ("Phoebus"), and so on. As this chain of supplementarity makes apparent, all attempts toward firstness are invariably frustrated or deferred, leading the scholar to realize that "The first idea is an imagined thing" (CP 387). Yet the belated scholar is he who best imagines firstness because it is exactly that which he can never have: "And not to have is the beginning of desire" (CP 382). He is fully cognizant of the fact that "what [he] has is what is not" (CP 382)--not firstness, not purity, not the nameless thing-in-itself. What the scholar has is a string of belated figures which, like the major man, are "foundling[s] of the infected past" (canto IX), a dead past which has left behind innumerable orphans with which their poetic sons have to deal.

The myth of firstness is a refreshing fiction, despite the fact that "The first idea was not our own" (CP 383), because it gives birth to further fictions or poems. Armed with the lessons of "It Must Be Abstract," the scholar sets out to write "Credences of Summer" but is overwhelmed in canto I by the plenteousness of the landscape:

> This is the last of a certain year
> Beyond which there is nothing left of time.
> .....
> There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt
> And this must comfort the heart's core against
> Its false disasters-- (CP 372)

This is a poem of limits, the ends of boundaries, the point of saturation, and extremes. Caught in the "dead of summer" (L 721), the poet feels suffocated, his powers stifled, his capacity to assert selfhood dwarfed. As Bloom would have it, he succumbs to the "prime poetic evil"--"the unpleasure of a conscious belatedness" (PC 187).[17] By actively willing "the ever-early candor," he can declare his own poetic prowess: "The poem, through candor, brings back a power again/That gives a candid kind to everything" (CP 382). In canto II he does just that:

> Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
> Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight,
> Burn everything not part of it to ash.
>
> Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
> Without evasion by a single metaphor,
> Look at it in its essential barrenness
> And say this, this is the centre that I seek. (CP 373)

The poet weaves his spell, in language reminiscent of a magical incantation, to restore his poetic virility.

The center of "arrested peace" (CP 373) that the revitalized poet seeks is bare reality, here troped as summer or "the barrenness/Of the fertile thing that can

attain no more" (CP 373). Like other singers before him, he, too, sings his song to summer/woman, a song which similarly expresses his wish-fantasy to know absolutely the meaning of his "hard prize" (CP 376):

> Three times the concentred self takes hold, three times
> The thrice concentred self, having possessed
>
> The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
> Once to make captive, once to subjugate
> Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
> The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
> Fully made, fully apparent, fully found. (CP 376)

The lyrical (male) desire to subdue difference (woman)--magnified in canto VIII into an entire historical literary tradition, as the male poetic singers unite to sing harmoniously in the deep woods--is, nonetheless, thwarted in the larger narrative context much as the summer day itself cannot be comprehended outside of the larger context of the year. Although the poet maintains that the day (the ideal, the present, the lyrical) enriches the year and that the day makes flagrant the strength of "the youth, the vital sun, the heroic power" (CP 375), the day cannot stand in pure isolation because it is already contaminated by its context. Similarly, summer cannot be seen without metaphorical evasion because it is knowable only by what it is not: not "spring's infuriations" or "autumn's inhalations" (CP 372). It lures the poet into the trap of "arrested peace" (a kind of death) and yet never reveals its "essential barrenness."

Summer is an otherness (woman) that defies even the "hottest fire of sight" (CP 373), for it is the season most ruthlessly dominated by the sun. While the sun, on the one hand, bleaches the scene white and evokes a "Pure rhetoric of a language without words" (CP 374), it also defies the direct perception of the poet's "clairvoyant eye" (CP 374). The failure of the eye (I) and the ear to face the sun,

both regarded by Derrida as the idealizing "objective" senses,[18] exposes the sun's illusory unification of signifier and signified, language and meaning, to be illusory. The sun is, as Riddel states in his essay "Metaphoric Staging," "irreducibly a name, for that idea cannot be perceived directly" (318). Consequently, just as the poet-scholar learned from "It Must Be Abstract," every attempt to trace the sun without evasion is already an evasion necessarily. He cannot still this over-ripened summer day, which continues to rot as the poem continues in time, anymore than his poetic predecessors could. Any ttempt to do so, by naming the sun/ summer, brings on an onslaught of tropes "like ten thousand tumblers tumbling down/To share the day" (CP 376). The poem's irreducible metaphoricity makes of the poet a mere "personage in a multitude" (CP 377).

The trumpet blares of canto VIII are not, for this reason, the blares of the apocalypse when all things reach their resolution or the poet's prophetic recognition of his own oncoming death (Bloom, PC 251). It is the "trumpet of morning," announcing the return of the sun and the continuation of metaphorical play. Its cry that "This is the successor of the invisible" (CP 376) refers to the inevitable metaphorical substitution (with a speed akin to thousands of tumblers tumbling) as its antecedent. This incessant play succeeds the invisible gods of old with their outmoded fictions of the sun and the Logos; this substitution without end "Must take its place, as what is possible/Replaces what is not" (CP 376). The summertime world desired by the poet cannot be stilled in time and subjugated in the mind of the poet until it is made "a permanent part of the human domain," as Alan Perlis wants to argue in Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes. The male lyric voice cannot domesticate the feminine reality which is always other.

The lyrical desire to be positioned atop "the natural tower of all the world," that "point of survey" and "Axis of everything" (CP 373), is as beautiful a fairy tale as that of twelve princes sitting before a king (CP 375). And, yet, by the ninth canto the lyrical poet's will to subjugate aberrant reality is collapsed:

> The gardener's cat is dead, the gardener gone
> And last year's garden grows salacious weeds.
>
> A complex of emotions falls apart,
> In an abandoned spot. (CP 377)

In the hollow of the long poem, the lyrical impulses are seriously challenged and threatened. The male will to order is confronted with a distinctly different rhetoric, a power to dismantle: "you detect/Another complex of other emotions, not/So soft, so civil" (CP 377). The lyric poet or "polished beast" suddenly finds himself in an alien context, a "decay," which he cannot assimilate by incorporating it into his "spirit of the arranged" (CP 377) because its otherness necessarily defies him.

In the struggle to keep his lyric voice alive in this disseminating context, the poet can, at best, imagine a theatrical form wherein characters enact the difference he cannot appropriate. He will create his "personae of summer" (CP 377) and dress them in the "appropriate habit for/The huge decorums, the manner of time,/Part of the mottled mood of summer's whole" (CP 378). Deep in meditation he will see, not hear, "his characters" speak their parts; their speech, which he cannot hear, he interprets as free, complete, and youthfully happy, even though theirs is not a free speech at all but the prefixed script of the dramatist's notes. What he chooses to see are merely images reflected on the walls of his empty (inhuman) mind, images which coalesce (come together?) briefly in the satisfaction of his fantasy. But, even so, homogeneity is scattered in this site of the drama of writing (not speech): the

characters' fatness invariably aligns them with the all-inclusive and excessive fat girl of "Notes," our model of woman as liar, narrative, metaphysical substitution, play. Their playfulness, which defies lyrical suppression, is a dimension of the fat girl's wildly aberrational nature.

Having asserted the myth of Abstraction or firstness in order to restore his poetic virility, Stevens proceeds to his second exercise of "Notes": the problematic of Change, which he explores in "The Auroras of Autumn." The principle lesson of "It Must Change" is aptly summed up by Rajeev Patke:

> To abstract and to be abstract thus provide an impetus to change. They initiate a movement; abstraction is not an end in itself. It frees the poet to metamorphose anew into the play of metaphor which is the true existence of the "Notes." (139)

Change is contingent upon an appreciation and a love of difference, neither of which can be made manifest until one first cleanses the mind: "I think only too often that what we constantly need is a fresh start--a fresh start every day, like a clean shirt" (L 454). Thus, "It Must Change" bemoans the deadliness of constancy in cantos I to IV, a constancy he calls "the distaste we feel for this withered scene/... that...has not changed enough" (CP 390). This ardent scholar, one of "the lovers of truth" (NA 23), must learn that "the origin of change is grounded in the "embrace" of opposites:

> Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
> On one another, as a man depends
> On a woman,...
> This is the origin of change. (CP 392)

Man/woman, day/night, imagined/real--"between these poles the universal interdependence exists, and hence...they are equal and inseparable" (NA 24). Such is the message/marriage which lies at the very heart of "Notes" (II, iv.).

Despite Stevens' sense that "all of us live in a monotony" (L 449), the cardinal text of "Notes" teaches him that "The freshness of transformation is/The freshness of a world" (CP 397-398). Each poetic metaphor the poet can create is "of these beginnings, gay and green"; it, itself, "propose[s]/The suitable amours" (CP 398) in its binding together of difference. What is particularly interesting about "It Must Change" is that the fiction of oneness between poet (imagination) and woman (reality) is expressed in traditionally patriarchal terms. This marriage of difference entails the very suppression of that difference into oneness, a oneness which places the male/lyric poet on top and in the position of control. Recall, momentarily, Stevens' letter to Henry Church in which he treats the power of Van Gogh's art:

> ...I don't mean a mania of manner, but I mean the total subjection of reality to the artist. It may be only too true that Van Gogh had fortuitous assistance in the mastery of reality. But he mastered it, no matter how. And that is so often what one wants to do in poetry: to seize the whole mass of everything and squeeze it, and make it one's own. (L 459)

The masculine desire to control (a lyric will to order) is, however, already caught in a disseminating feminine context. Lying within his room, this lover encounters the stubborn "otherness" as he "breathe[s]/ A odor evoking nothing, absolute./We encounter in the dead middle of the night/The purple odor, the abundant bloom" (CP 394-395).[19] Yet his lyrical voice is the synthesizing center: he is the notion of presence that is both inside and outside of the structure, controlling it completely and escaping from aberrant play. In this same canto, VII, the "lover sighs as for accessible bliss,/which he can take within him on his breath,/Possess in his heart, conceal and nothing known" (CP 395). This will to possession is the mark of the "ignorant man,/Who chants the book, in the heat of the scholar, who writes/The book, hot for another accessible bliss" (CP 395).

After analyzing the poetic lyrical urge in canto VII, the poet then lapses into the illustrative fable of canto VIII. But here the fable fails to illustrate the lyric will to possession and synthesis. Here we find Nanzia Nunzio "confront" (no longer the rhetoric of the gentle embracing of difference) her bridegroom Ozymandias. What makes her strip-tease particularly significant is that, with each divestment of her clothing, she asserts her own self-identity or otherness in the refrain-like repetition of "I am." By the end of her act, she makes the declaration that "I am the woman stripped more nakedly/Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible/Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse" (CP 396). She remains the "contemplated," not "consummated" spouse; so not withstanding her multiple demands that he speak words that will clothe her in ornamentation ("Speak to me," "Set on me," "Clothe me") and so perfect her, Ozymandias (that masculine "inflexible/Order") can only admit defeat in the context of her presence. The groom can no more dress his bride in perfect metaphorical attire, then he can possess her in all her nakedness. Her radical difference is his disappointment and his pleasure: "the bride/Is never naked. A fictive covering/Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP 396). In the words of canto IX, the fable makes it clear that "There's a meditation there, in which there seems/To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or/Not apprehended well" (CP 396).

In terms of the long poetic (non)form, its meditative aspects are continually disturbed by this evasive thing, which defies apprehension and which constitutes the narrative aspect, itself. The long poem is a record of the lyric poet's attempts as

> He tries by a peculiar speech to speak
>
> The peculiar potency of the general,
> To compound the imagination's Latin with
> The lingua franca et jocundissima. (CP 397)

However, this section of "Notes" ends with the lyrical voice submerging itself into its own consoling fictions of control and order. In his mind, that "Theatre/Of Trope" (CP 397), he enters a "place of trance" (L 434) through which the west wind blows a host of metaphorical transformations. The gentleness of these changes is made apparent in the trope of the wind itself: "The west wind was the music, the motion, the force/To which the swans curveted, a will to change" (CP 397). For the wind blows in a host of harmonious metaphors: a page of music, an upper air, a momentary colour, swans as seraphs and saints. This harmony evokes his transcendentalist impulses--his power to control the play of metaphorical substitution while safely outside of its reaches, sitting on the park bench observing the liquid play in the lake.

The theoretical text of "It Must Change" does not sufficiently prepare the scholar poet, still "hot" for "accessible bliss," for the actual experience of change that he confronts in "The Auroras of Autumn." The wind that blows through his long poem is a fusillade of agitation, upheaval, and tumult. Change is not the gentle embrace of opposites into synthesizing unity, but the violence of opposites clashing relentlessly into one another; here we are thrown "In hall harridan, not hushful paradise" (CP 421).

While the opening cantos of "It Must Change" stress the need to cleanse one's mind in order to precipitate refreshing change, the opening cantos of "The Auroras" propose not a simple cleansing, but a more radical erasure of the mind's few consolations: the idea of home, of the mother, and of the father. By the exercise of these three massive erasures, in cantos II, III, and IV, the poet arrives at the wistful recognition that now "The cancellings,/The negations are never final"

(CP 414). The continuous change with which the poet is here forced to contend is foregrounded at the outset.

This long poem begins with the poet-scholar's sudden recognition that he has been teased into the empty hollow ("cavea" or cave). After long wandering, he arrives but his "arrival" is problematical. His first words are, "This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless" (CP 411). The primary implications of his (non)arrival is that, in this context, the male lyrical voice is anything but the master. The true "master of the maze" (CP 411) is always something other: a "serpent," a "form gulping after formlessness," a "body flashing without the skin," an "Indian in his glade" (CP 411-412). Try as he may cognitively to know and thereby to master it--he repeatedly attempts to pin it down by stating "This is where...," "This is his...," "These fields, these hills..." (CP 411)--the serpent's slippery changes escape him. Its presence is always an absence.

The tone of canto one is notedly different from that of an earlier serpent poem, "The Bagatelles the Madrigals." In "The Bagatelles," the poet begins by boldly questioning the serpent: "Where do you think, serpent,/Where do you lie..." (CP 213). From there he questions the people: "Where is it that you think, baffled/By the trash of life..." (CP 213). At the termination of all his questions and his implied judgements, the poet, in his elevated stance, concludes with the parenthetically enclosed and thus understated claim that

> (This is one of the thoughts
> Of the mind that forms itself
> Out of all the minds,
> One of the songs of that dominance.) (CP 213)

Gone is his earlier song of dominance by the writing of "The Auroras." The lyric voice is now stung by a poison that leaves him disbelieving all things, all once-

upon-a-time certainties. Like the meditating serpent who moves "to make sure of Sun" (CP 411), the poet is made "no less as sure" (CP 412)--sure only of change, uncertainty, metamorphosis, all of which are epitomized by the sun, itself, as the grand heliotrope. "It Must Change" of "Notes," with its gentle embracing of opposites, ill-prepares poet for anything akin to lyrical confidence. The experience of writing "The Auroras" is that the violence of change leaves him reduced and terrified.

The wind, which blew in a host of transcendentalist images and easeful transformations in "It Must Change," now ravages the settings of cantos II-IV in "The Auroras," erasing even the sacred images of consolation once found "at ease in a shelter of the mind" (CP 413). The wind is described as "cold" (II), violent (III), and "naked" (IV), terms which align it with woman/reality as "hall harridan." Caught in the grips of her powerful "velocities of change" (CP 414), the poet interprets reality to be too enormous, too excessive; it abandons us to "stand in the tumult of a festival" (CP 415) which is loud, disordered, and brutish, all qualities repugnant to the lyric poet as "polished beast."[20] Reality has lured the poet onward but now its "decoying voice" has trapped him: "The scholar of one candle sees/An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame/Of everything he is. And he feels afraid" (CP 417). In a later letter to José Rodriguez Feo, Stevens sums up the same trope of entrapment: "But unless we do these things to reality, the damned thing closes in us, walls us up and buries us alive" (L 599). To face the trap adequately, Stevens claims that one must use the summer to get well again, so as to get in "an extraordinary position to carry on the struggle with and against reality and against the fifth column of reality that keeps whispering with the hard superiority of the

sane that reality is all we have, that it is that or nothing" (L 599). Armed with this knowledge only, the poet must go alone to meet woman/ reality repeatedly--the "rendezvous" is a "freedom" and an "isolation" "which only the two could share" (CP 419)--even though she heralds both his life and his death. The "drama" that the poet lives is his "fated," continued meeting with her "alone" and his continued inability to know "Of what disaster is this the immanence:/Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt" (CP 419). His love for her keeps him coming back, however, because on her "everything depends" (L 600).

In the tug of power between the lyric voice and the narrative context, masculine and feminine, the latter reigns supreme in this late poem of change. While Nanzio Nunzio had yet to have the "spirit's diamond coronal" (CP 396) set upon her head, the enormously blown-up fat girl is now "an imagination that sits enthroned" (CP 417). "Sitting/In the highest night," she is "crystalled and luminous;" a "crown and mystical cabala" (CP 417) are her traits. She disseminates all that is knowable and familiar, "Extinguishing our planets, one by one" and leaving behind a "shivering residue" or a trace of a presence that is but an absence (CP 417). Faced with her relentless transformations "to no end" (CP 416), the poet is dwarfed. His consoling dramatical production in the mind, which gives him a sense of power and control at the end of "Credences of Summer," is no longer a possibility in the auroral context. Now as the "personae of summer" don the habit of autumn, they immediately forfeit their state of being "Complete in a completed scene" (CP 378). Now "there are no lines to speak? There is no play" (CP 416), because the theatrical play of tropes exists outside of the poet's mind and, by extension, control. The "lavishing of itself in change" is accomplished so quickly

and continuously that tropes achieve "half-thought of forms" (CP 416) at best. Fragments, not completion, is all that remains possible:

> The theatre is filled with flying birds,
> Wild wedges, as of a volcano's smoke, palm-eyed
> And vanishing, a web in a corridor
>
> Or a massive portico. A capital,
> It may be, is emerging or has, just
> Collapsed. The denouement has to be postponed... (CP 416)

Deferral, postponement, detours--these things mark the long poetic form wherein the fat girl reigns supreme. She is the "prolific ellipsis" to whom the "single man" (CP 416) must pledge his love despite his fear; she is the play of language that he cannot subdue or control.

The "predicate," that which grammatically keeps the "subject" going "against calamity," is a fragile will to believe in "a time of innocence/As a pure principle" (CP 418). He can exercise control over the stunning auroral display only as long as he can sustain the belief "That we partake thereof"; in short, by straining to collapse the difference between inside/outside, imagination/reality, and lyric/ narrative, the poet can be at peace and "Lie down like children in this holiness" (CP 418). If the difference can be erased, the horror of such change would be reduced to a mere tale, sung in the dark by an innocent mother (CP 419). But midway through canto IX, the fiction collapses and the "fated" difference reasserts itself.

The rabbi reads the mystical cabala of reality/woman, and what he reads are "the phases of this difference" (CP 420). The rabbi, who is a Tiresias figure that has "lived all lives, that he might know" (CP 420), is called upon to read the "secretive syllables," "this extremity," which bring him back to the initial difference itself: "An unhappy people in a happy world" (CP 420). The "haggling of wind

and weather," outside and inside, reality and imagination, is ongoing and irresolvable "by these lights" (CP 421). In this disseminative context, the lyric voice can "[meditate] a whole" (CP 420) but is doomed to explode "Like a blaze of summer straw, in a winter's nick" (CP 421). Every desire and attendant attempt to achieve an idyllic synthesis will only produce yet another "blaze" of colour "Splashed wide-wise because it likes magnificence/And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space" (CP 416).[21] The long poetic (non)form is such a splashing of metaphorical play in a "wide-wise" fashion that gives way to "solemn pleasures."

As change gives way to pleasure, "The Auroras of Autumn" gives way to "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." This last long poem concludes both the end of this study and the end of the poet-scholar's exercises, which here center on the problematic of pleasure. As "The Auroras" makes clear in canto VII, the auroral lights are "the white creator of black" (CP 417): they give birth to a writing that disseminates itself across the blank expanse of white paper.[22] This "lavishing of itself in change" (CP 416) will spin the poet into a new imaginative era: "The house will crumble and the books will burn" (CP 413). The myth of things "all together" (CP 413) will shatter. Writing as "slight caprice" (CP 417) will be born, and it will create a form obedient to its own secret law--the once suppressed law of woman. She alone is the (non)presence that "sits enthroned" (CP 417) in this theatricalized "scene of writing":

> Writing is always already staged, already always a scene, not simply a broken immediateness, but a rupture of any notion of the immediate. Writing involves the whole movement of language--displacement, substitution, repetition, which puts in question the classical concept of representation, of the production of signs that represent, as a double, something, event, idea, "thing-in-itself," etc.
>
> (Riddel, "Metaphoric Staging" 355, 1n)

This scene will not be centered on the "subject" of the writing, for "within that scene, on that stage, the punctual simplicity of the classical subject is not to be found" (Derrida, WD 227).[23] Stevens' aphorism--"Reality is a vacuum" (OP 168)--is particularly apropos of this feminine site.

> In this scene of writing, the fat girl's (non)presence is the
>
> ...object
> of the perpetual meditation, point
> of the enduring, visionary love,
>
> Obscure... (CP 466)

She is the play of language, "the whole movement of language"; she is "difference," an "aberration," the "more than natural figure," the "irrational/Distortion," and the "fiction that results from feeling" (CP 406). In the words of "Description Without Place," she is the "green queen" who comes in a "golden vacancy" (CP 339) or a hollowness, for she is "change immenser than/A poet's metaphors in which being would/Come true" (CP 341). Not only is she the play of language, but also "the theory of the word" (CP 345), itself. The realm she governs is, thus, "a world of words to the end of it,/In which nothing solid is its solid self" (CP 345). The lover whose heart is poisoned by her sting (she is serpent, queen, auroral lights, autumnal wind, summer sun) must become engaged in "the never-ending meditation" of her (CP 465). Pleasure and death blur for the male lover because to meditate on her evasiveness is to stare into "The nothingness [that] was a nakedness" (CP 402), as does Canon Aspirin; to question if she will leave him and other lyric singers "hanging in the trees next spring?" (CP 419); to feel the pending madness of an unsatisfiable desire that is "Always in emptiness that would be filled" (CP 467), which is the complaint of the lover in "An Ordinary Evening." But while he cannot

(like Ozymandias) either face her pure nakedness or clothe her properly, he can, at best, repeat her many folds (her mani-fold cancellations and systematic extinguishings) in the act of writing "a larger poem for a larger audience" (CP 465).

The model of woman is what Stevens called, in "The Irrational Element in Poetry," "an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning" (OP 226). She is the "unknown" and unknowable with "seductions more powerful and more profound than those of the known" (OP 228)--"We are obsessed by the irrational" (OP 225), which keeps us coming back and back. As language she is "perpetual creation" (NA 33), but she is also the continual cancellation of language exactly at the level of meaningful statement. The possibility of a literal, "natural," or unrhetorical language is just one of the many "concepts" systematically extinguished in her context. Hence, her "body" is traversed by paths of thought that go nowhere. Because she is neither the truth nor the lie, the ideal nor the real, she suspends and confounds the simple clashing of metaphysical oppositions in their search of hierarchical privileging. As a model of reading and writing for difference, she remains a non-locus upon which everything depends. The teasing nature of her evasive rhetoric is the cause of the poet's pleasure in her, despite her repeated absenting of herself. She can give pleasure continually because she is always "fresh" and "strange" (OP 228): she cannot become "rubbish in the end" (CP 392). We must remember that she is part of the myth before the myth of metaphysics began. Preceding essence or thingness, she cannot be an ideal signified, so she can never turn into "an inhuman bronze" (CP 391); rather she is herself, "a kind/Of volatile world" (CP 397) or the spinning play of signifiers to no end.

Pleasure hinges on a love that cannot overcome this difference. For this reason the "mystic marriage in Catawba," in canto IV of "It Must Give Pleasure," is not a marriage of opposites at all. Although all the signs point toward resolution (the zenith hour of the day, the mid-day of the year), such unity is denied. The captain and his maiden's hymn is that "Anon/We loved but would no marriage make. Anon/ The one refused the other one to take,/Foreswore the sipping of the marriage wine" (CP 401). They remain "love's characters come face to face" (CP 401), because they liberate one another from the prison of the metaphysical hierarchy and remain independently faithful to the earth and the sun, sites or scenes of writing/troping/supplementarity. This fable of pleasure is not as B.J. Leggett argues, in Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory, a figure for the entire poem because it presents the union of sun and earth, mind and place, at midsummer (86).[24] There is no lifting up to a higher sphere of existence here: what they love (earth, sun) remain different, sharing identity only in that the marriage-place is "neither heaven nor hell" (CP 401). The captain and Bawda stand "face to face" in a repetition of one another, yet they are a repetition with a difference. They each read the marriage-place, the seeming focus of what they loved, differently. As "signs" which are to "stop the whirlwind" (CP 401), they instead contribute to the "whirlwind," the circulation of signs and play of signifiers. Difference leads to pleasure, not metaphysical marriage. Unity, singleness, the transcendental signified--they are all irrecuperable. Only traces of the metaphysical remain.

In canto I of "It Must Give Pleasure," the lyric voice recalls a bygone era when "jubilas" were sang at "exact, accustomed times," and one was crested with "the mane of a multitude" as he went off to war "borne on/The shoulders of joyous

men" (CP 398). But such memories are now "a facile exercise" (CP 398). The "blue woman" of Canto II is "linked and lacquered" to her past through her contemplation at the window, a remembering that is without desire (death-like?) yet adamic in its power to name the things she sees "coldly" and "clearly" (CP 400). But her recollections are already tainted (never having been pure) because the eye (I) is always already an intruder that imposes an interpretation. In canto III, we are presented with a Keatsian image of a collapsed and dying god from a past when gods were revered and their statues a mark of mass reverence. But while "It might and might have been" (CP 400) significant to us, and while the old legends speak of a bucolic era, the god of old is decapitated. His face is weathered and water-worn, his throat suffocated by the vines that strangle it, his lips rendered shapeless by his passionless nature (CP 400). These traces are in a state of decay or in a process of erasure (in the realm of the feminine, "Life is the elimination of what is dead" [OP 169]).

The exfoliation process reveals that "nothingness was a nakedness" (CP 402), but the fable of the Canon Aspirin is a testimony of how difficult it is for the masculine lyrical voice to descend into this abyss of language which confounds literal, rational, unrhetorical meaning. Hot with desire for the irrational, that "point,/Beyond which fact could not progress as fact" (CP 402), the Canon lapses into sleep and, in the process, opens himself to flying "Straight to the utmost crown of night" (CP 403). But he, like "the scholar of one candle" in "The Auroras," feels afraid because at "the utmost crown of night" sits the huge imagination of the fat girl. In his sleep-fantasy, he sees himself falling "with huge pathetic force" (CP 403) into her likewise huge folds. Just before he is to pass that point of division

between the exclusion and the inclusion of things. In his fantasy he chooses the latter: "He chose to include the things/That in each other are included, the whole,/The complicate, the amassing harmony" (CP 403).

The rhetoric of canto VI counters, however, the Canon's wish-fantasy. Stanza two, for example, stresses how the "learn[ed]" man "conceived" the vision he is about to "experience." By stanza four we learn that he is the ascending angel, but he is objectified from himself and able to watch himself from a safe outside perspective as he moves through the starry orbit. The act of penetrating the very crown of night itself, the regal fat girl, is not enacted but "conceived"; this is to say that he cannot go beyond reason, logic, or linear thinking, but only imagine it in a vision that he witnesses safely on the outside. Unable to experience personally the "muddled self of sleep" that his sister wishes for her girls (CP 402), the Canon cannot turn away from his daytime self. He remains rivetted to his mind and its power to "[impose] orders as he thinks of them" (CP 403); consequently, the nothingness of night's incessant cancellations touch him not at all, for instead he fortifies his world with "safe" metaphysical structures: "capitols," in the "corridors" of which "He establishes statues of reasonable men" (CP 403).

Midway through canto VII the lyrical speaker criticizes the Canon for lapsing back momentarily and nostalgically to these metaphysical consolations because, he concludes bluntly, "to impose is not/To discover" (CP 403). Unlike the naive Canon, this lyric speaker has learned something about the horror of the act of discovery: the delightfully rotund fat girl will "come,/Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,/Warmed by a desperate milk" (CP 404). But having come this far out on the edge of unlikeness or difference, the lyric speaker, himself, retreats.

The conclusion of canto VII reconfirms the speaker's insistent belief in "The fiction of an absolute" (CP 404), a First Idea, a recuperable origin. So, rather than sustain his dismissal of the Canon, he beckons the Canon as flying angel back, not in his secular form but his purely transcendent form: "Angel,/Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear/The luminous melody of proper sound" (CP 404).[25] The lyric speaker shuttles uncomfortably between his lyrical impulses (the Canon-become-Angel) and his narrative context (the Fat Girl-become-beast). Unlike either Vendler who argues the poet is despairing here (OEW 197) or Bloom who takes the obverse stance to argue for Stevens' control (PC 211), I propose very ambiguous tonal shifts that swing undecidedly from warm nostalgia to cold rejection to a kind of radical forgetting. By the end of canto VII, the lyrical voice seems to have forgotten its own earlier rejection of the Canon's errors--its earlier insight now becomes its blindness. It wanders awkwardly between "decisions" that radically contradict one another, using a "logic" that fissures the naive continuity between beginning (thesis), middle (antithesis), and end (synthesis).

The angst of the lyrical speaker's cry--"What am I to believe?" (CP 404)--is not to be sloughed off as "serious parody" (Bloom, PC 110), because cantos VIII and IX confront the issue of (sexual?) satisfaction, which is always of critical concern to the poet-scholar-lover. Here he asks who is more satisfied--the angel who freefalls into "the violent abyss" (CP 404), an "angel" which is now aligned with the feminine realm of "deep space" as opposed to the masculine realm of "the gold centre" (CP 404)? or he, as lyric poet, who imagines the angel's experience at a point safely removed from the dizzying play of metaphorical substitution? His wish to resolve this undecidedness is apparent in the number of questions (some

rhetorical) he raises in canto VIII: What should I believe? Am I less satisfied? Whose wings and air is it? Whose experience is this? Do I keep saying that there is a time when I will be completely self-satisfied?[26] With what do we fill the external regions? But each question raised only further defers any hope of resolution or totalization. Either to fall into the abyss of difference or to assimilate the abyss into the fullness of self ("I have not but I am and as I am, I am" [CP 405]) and, through the assertion of one's own selfhood, transform the "violent abyss" into the "expressible bliss" of aesthetic form and structure--his options hang suspended. (So, too, are the poet's options between the lyrical impulse to impose control and order and the narrative context that supplements violent alterity for lyric satiety.) Satisfaction can never be fully felt because the poet can never resolve for himself whether to fall or to assimilate. His angst is Cinderella's: the bittersweet pleasure is that her life is governed by the impending midnight hour which radically severs her life into irreconcilable parts necessarily.

If the "external regions"--the realm of the fat girl at the crown of night--can only be filled with "reflections" which are, according to the appositional phrase, "escapades of death" (CP 405), then her realm of supplementarity can never be filled because every lyrical reflection is not a presence but an absence. The realm of supplementarity--the long poem--is an continuously filled and emptying vessel (a gutter?). Its capacity to grant pleasure has everything to do with the fact that each lyrical reflection is "an escapade of death": its life is in the act of its demise, its failure to fulfill itself. Just as Cinderella is imprisoned by her unyielding midnight curfew, the lyric poet is constrained by his own necessary repetitions. In the fat girl's realm of difference, he can attempt to sustain the fiction of his lyrical

sovereignty: "I can/Do all that angels can. I enjoy like them/ ...like men in light secluded" (CP 405). But his sovereignty is sorely challenged. Pleasure stems, he realizes, from watching the dizzying spin of the falling leaves (once angels), but this "constant spin" and "eccentric measure" (CP 406) are something he can only repeat--at best. To be a master in this context is to be a servant, for here he must humbly repeat the fat girl's aberrational play.

Humble repetition of the "irrational/Distortion" (CP 406), however, flies in the face of this poet, who sees himself in line for enlistment into the exclusive club of strong male singers. It cannot be reconciled with his professed poetics of violence and force, so often alluded to in "The Noble Rider" essay. Canto X reveals this conflict because he, himself, cannot adequately repress his violent desire to master and to subjugate the feminine (non)principle:

> Civil, madam, I am, but underneath
> A tree, this unprovoked sensation requires
>
> That I should name you flatly, waste no words,
> Check your evasions, hold you to yourself. (CP 406)

Civility, his capacity to recognize and tolerate her difference, is thinly stretched. The word itself connotes a Victorian gentlemanly code of behaviour and, yet, his desire reflects the division between societal respectability and ungovernable sexual urges which must be repressed for order to be sustained. His masculine nature, signalled by his "unprovoked sensation," remains a will to power, to dominance, and to sovereignty. The imaginative violence, around which his masculine poetics revolves, fuels his belief that he has the power to name the distortion and, so, to flatten it into two dimensionality: "I will call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo./ You will have stopped revolving except in crystal" (CP 407). And yet, as

the coda makes plain, the poet's (romance) war is "a war that never ends" (CP 407) because neither can her otherness be mastered, nor her evasions checked. This "beau linguist" is fluent in many different tongues, each of which is expressed with an "accent of deviation" (OP 96).

In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," moreso than in any other long poem, Stevens throws himself longingly on the form of woman in true abandonment. Here he attempts to enter fully the night-time realm which is filled with her absent presence. His exercise in pleasure, which demands his free-fall into her "incalculably plural" (CP 340) folds, is not an exercise in deprivation, "the harshest of all his experiments" according to Vendler (OEW 269). By failing to see this poem as an exercise in pleasure, Vendler condemns it to being a eulogy to its own death: "a resolutely impoverished poem" (269), "the saddest of all Stevens' poems" (269), "threatens to die of its own starvation" (270), "Stevens' own voice turned beaten beast" (273), "an impotence" (274). Stevens' virility and pride as ardent lover is anything but depleted here; rather a strange, youthful willingness to risk all for his fat girl overtakes him. Now he is prepared to free-fall, to wander "Without regard to time or where we are,/In the perpetual reference" (CP 466). Now, as he states in "Prologues to What is Possible," he is prepared to "[travel] alone, like a man lured on by a syllable without any meaning" (CP 516). In such a realm where signifiers point to no clear signified, the poet lover is left with "Words, lines, not meanings, not communications" (CP 465), only the continual deferral of "an and yet, and yet, and yet--" (CP 465). Here as he states in canto II, the "point/Of the enduring, visionary love" is "obscure," "uncertain," "indefinite," and "Confused" (CP 466). But while the "point of vision" (CP 466) cannot be located,

being "the most furtive fiction" (OP 93), he knows that "The point of vision and desire are the same" (CP 466). Consequently, "An Ordinary Evening" is not an "almost unremittingly minimal" poem (Vendler, OEW 270), but a poem of an unsatisfiable desire and the unremitting pleasure it stimulates.

In canto III, Stevens openly declares the nature of his love, for love of the fat girl is the key to his sexual-poetic energy and, by extension, the key to the relation between pleasure and the long poem. His treatise on love enacts a supplementation:

> ...next to holiness is the will thereto,
> And next to love is the desire for love,
> The desire for its celestial ease in the heart,
>
> Which nothing can frustrate, that most secure,
> Unlike love in possession of that which was
> To be possessed and is. But this cannot
>
> Possess. (CP 467)

The desire for love both adds itself to love and supplements a lack in love itself. Unlike love itself, the desire for love cannot be frustrated because it possesses nothing; it is secure in its possession of nothing. His "logic" continues to confound itself when he argues tautologically that the desire for love "is desire" (CP 467). In Mythologies, Roland Barthes reminds us that "In tautology, there is a double murder: one kills rationality because it resists one; one kills language because it betrays one...Tautology testifies to a profound distrust of language, which is rejected because it is failed...Tautology creates a dead, a motionless world" (152-153). The "logic" of his grounding definition submits to further slippage even as he attempts to locate it in space, because he uses a string of prepositional phrases that point everywhere and go nowhere: "It is desire, set deep in the eye,/Behind all actual

seeing, in the actual scene,/In the street, in a room, on a carpet or a wall" (CP 467). His disquisition on love is delightfully parodic, since he cannot "thoroughly" seek out any thesis. Each "logical" step forward is only undone by its own logic.

Condemned to wander in the "prolific narrative" (CP 287) of the long poem (because of his "desire for love"), the poet finds his faculty of reasoning countered and confounded by difference. As written in "Things of August," difference (woman) "habituates him to the invisible,/By its faculty of the exceptional,/The faculty of ellipses and deviations,/In which he exists but never as himself" (CP 493). Reasoning and speech reigned supreme in the past (a monological, logocentric past), referred to in canto XIX: "A century in which everything was part/Of that century and of its aspect, a personage,/A man who was the axis of his time" (CP 479). But "The self, the chrysalis of all men/Became divided in the leisure of blue day" (CP 468). To continue with the allegory in canto XIX, Stevens recognizes that now a different "radial aspect" governs this "place" we occupy--"A figure like Ecclesiast" (CP 475). That we only get a simile as opposed to a specific signified is crucial, because the figure of Ecclesiast is only a figure for writing itself. This figure like Ecclesiast sings a "text" that perhaps bears meaning ("an answer") within it, but its meaning is "obscure," unattainable or concealed. Its meaning or truth is veiled woman, about whom the "Rugged and luminous" male lyric singer can only sing a writing (a chain of supplements or notes toward) but cannot possess in pristine clarity. Her faculty of ellipses and deviations--the faculty of writing--is the necessary deviance, the necessary wandering from the truth into error. It confounds the faculty of reason's quest for a master concept; it distances itself continually from the logocentric will to appropriation; it exposes any singular

philosophic "given" to be illusory by putting it under quotation marks.

The difference between these two faculties is acted out in canto VI, which personifies them as "Naked Alpha" and "hierophant Omega" (CP 469). Both A and Z "appoint themselves" the "immaculate interpreters of life," but both do so under very different terms. The difference lies in their irreconcilable views of "the end and the way/To the end," for while "Alpha continues to begin/Omega is refreshed at every end." In Helen Vendler's reading, this discomforting difference is unified in the mind's enormity: "The mind, in short, is larger than its categories, and can contain beginning and end, group them into a continuum, while recognizing their absolute difference in outline" (OEW 299). But is difference so quietly synthesized because of the "human element" (299)? Is resolution so simply achieved?

Alpha's fear of "men" or "Omega's men" (have we armies in battle here?) stems from the violent capacity of the one to destroy the other. But only Omega comes fully armed with his men and "luminous vassals," as well as with the authority granted him by "dense investiture." Old and decrepit, he seeks to govern the "infant A" who stands alone on "infant legs." In her helplessness against Omega and his men, her only defense is her capacity to change quickly: "Alpha continues to begin." She can, thus, continually defer capture by the stooping Omega, who is only "refreshed at every end" or resolution. In this dramatized war of wills--the narrative will to openness and the lyrical will to closure--"both alike appoint themselves the choice/Custodians of the glory of the scene" because both are. In the scene of writing that is the long poem, for instance, A and Z can never be resolved: do we begin at a beginning or at an end? do we begin with reality or with the imagination? This dramatized scene of writing (the characters <u>are</u>

alphabet letters) cannot even be resolved in terms of the logocentrically-sanctioned line, or what Vendler calls the "continuum." For this reason Stevens makes light of their ancient Greek status by reducing their names to simple letters, mere fragments of signifiers. Lastly, resolution is problematized because the drama inverts the traditionally sanctioned hierarchy: the end is no longer the privileged moment of resolution or meaning because in our world of disembodied signifiers, as opposed to the Greek world's praise of the signified, "Reality is the beginning." In summation, "that's the difference" not only between A and Z but also between the contemporary world and the ancient, the text and the book.

These conflicting impulses constitute what Stevens calls in canto X "a total double thing" (CP 472). And in the contemporary world he lives in, the world of New Haven, this difference is "Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace" (CP 478). Difference is pleasure, it is "Mak[ing] gay the hallucinations in surfaces" (CP 472). To live in difference is to endure the death of the self as privileged presence, a death imaged in canto XXIV as the blowing up of the statue of Jove who symbolizes a now archaic age of reason. First Jove, then the man of bronze whose mind was made up (canto X), and then the self that "chrysalis of all men" (canto V)--the long poem commemorates their history and their demise, being as it is "the cold volume of forgotten ghosts" (CP 468). But this chilly tale of death comes "soothingly," so that this "children's tale of ice" gradually "Seems like a sheen of heat romanticized" (CP 468). By gradually accepting the displacement of the logocentric self, the poet opens and warms himself to the pleasure/ terror of difference. For in difference, the fat girl's realm, the self is thrown into the abyss between "is" and "was," an abyss that is "leaves in whirlings in the gutters" (CP

474). In the gutter (long poem), the leaves' (pages, writing, signifiers) whirling (troping) "[resembles] the presence of thought" and destroys this very notion simultaneously. That this force resembles thought does not mean that it is the thought of a sovereign subject, which Vendler posits when she writes that Stevens is able "to group together in a single speaking voice the whole psychology, the self, the town, the weather..." (OEW 277). The self, the source of thought and speech, is sucked into the gutter's casual litter, which defies its authorial status and makes it simply one fiction among many. In the gutter, a realm of leaves or writing, all privileging is effaced: the whole psychology, self, town, and weather now constitute mere links in a chain of signifiers caught in the whirlwind play of infinite substitutability. The once revered thinking subject becomes one of the "words of the world"--and no more.[27] This is "reality grimly seen" (CP 475).

Having recognized that the central presence of the self is as obsolete a fiction as God, Professor Eucalyptus reminds us, in canto XXII, that the quest is now for reality, that non-center that plays without security. His lesson is not only that the latter quest is as "momentous" as the former one, but also that they are radically different as well. Still constrained by a logocentric language of origins, he states that now "the sense/Of cold and earliness is a daily sense,/Not the predicate of bright origin." Origin is now a dispersed or scattered concept, a non-center as opposed to a last center. But it is important to remember that the Professor is still, as Derrida writes, "a captive of that metaphysical edifice which [he] professes to overthrow" (OG 19); and it is in that context that we are to understand his argument that "Creation is not renewed by images/Of lone wanderers." In "the midst of foreignness" (CP 471) that is reality, we cannot escape the concept of

origin, for it is now placed within quotation marks. The fictiveness of origin or firstness is revealed; hence, it is no longer the quester's guiding light, that "most ancient light in the most ancient sky," back to the securities of truth. The significance of his lecture is that "To re-create, to use/The cold and earliness and bright origin" as the fictions they are is not to arrive at a blessed still point of meaning but to continue "to search." This light shines not from God but "From the sleepy bosom of the real" (of woman) and to follow it is to surrender to the seminal adventure of the trace.

Canto IX enacts this deviance quite accurately. Although the lyric singer claims that "We seek/The poem of pure reality, untouched by trope or deviation" (CP 471), he cannot get "straight to the word,/Straight to the transfixing object." As Thomas Fink rightly observes in "Affirmative Play/Playful Affirmation," these two phrases are held in apposition, and yet there is no connection between word and object: straightness leads not to a singular point, but to two separate paths that cannot cross (90). Language is "a total double-thing" (CP 472) despite the eye (I)'s desire to reconcile difference into unity. The will to perceive totality "with the sight/Of simple seeing" (CP 471) is confounded by the inescapable deviance of language that invariably does something other. The play of language keeps bringing him back to the real, and to "Nothing beyond reality," because he can never truly "arrive." The real is not a word, a singular pure thing like the Logos, but words in their swarming excessiveness. Reality includes "Everything"--the spirit, the visible, the solid, the movable, the moment, the coming on of feasts, the habits of saints, the patterns of the heavens, and night air (CP 471-472)--and yet it is neither solely the "instinct for heaven" nor its "counterpart," the "instinct for earth" (CP 476). Its

excessiveness defies generic (gender) identification or classification, because the freeplay of language leads straight to . . . nothing.

As the poet writes in canto XVII, all "The trials of device" (CP 477) he might employ to get straight to reality itself, only lead him to "The dominant blank, the unapproachable." The underlying "blank" is and yet is not, since it cannot even be approached. All efforts to reach it are merely "wasted figurations" or else the purely decorative "Gold easings and ouncings and fluctuations of thread" used to weave a "robe of rays." Inescapably, the poet conceals meaning (the ornamental covering of the robe) in the very act of uncovering it, or at least attempting to do so. Because the dominant blank is only as it is not, the poet's figural ornamentation, traditionally treated as superfluous and marginal, becomes particularly important.

Ornament is, as Gregory Ulmer reminds us in Applied Grammatology, "a deliberate aspect of his [Derrida's] metaphorology, challenging the logocentric prejudice against rhetoric as ornament and showing that ornamentation itself can provide the methodology of a science (grammatology)" (40). Ulmer explains how Derrida uses the history of the ornament as a model for his concern for the marginal and supplementary, as opposed to the central:

> Against the logocentrism of Western metaphysics, which thought of style as something added on to thought as decoration, and which valorized the center of structure--the notion of presence which is both inside the structure yet outside, controlling it, out of play --Derrida proposes that our era is beginning to think of the structurality of structure, realizing that the center is not a natural or fixed focus but a function, 'sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions come into play' (40).

Professor Eucalyptus' eloquent lecture prepares the way for the privileging of the marginal. As such, he curtly dismisses his predecessors who believed that "Creation

is...renewed by images/Of lone wanderers." He dismisses Crispin in this gesture (Bloom, PC 328) but, more accurately, he dismisses his true nineteenth-century counterpart, the equally eloquent Professor Teufelsdröckh of Carlyle's Sartor Resartus. For the later professor, language is ornamental and marginal and, hence, delightfully aberrant; for the earlier professor, language is rhetorical ornamentation whose job it is to flesh out thought, meaning, and Being:

> Language is called the Garment of Thought: however, it should be, Language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body, of thought. I said that Imagination wove this Flesh-Garment; and does not she? Metaphors are her stuff: examine Language; what...what is it all but Metaphors, recognized as such, or no longer recognized. (Sartor Resartus 54)

However, Professor Eucalyptus is not always so confident in and at ease with the world of signs without truth or origin in which he lives.

For Professor Teufelsdröckh the discordant elements of reality are all miraculously healed into a whole. On "of [the] Nature of being not an Aggregate but a Whole," he writes:

> Detached, separated! I say there is no such separation: nothing hitherto was ever stranded, cast aside; but all, were it only a withered leaf, works together with all; is borne forward on the bottomless, shoreless flood of Action, and lives through perpetual metamorphoses...Rightly viewed no meanest object is insignificant; all objects are as windows, through which the philosophic eye looks into Infinitude itself. (Sartor Resartus 53).

In his letters, Stevens too uses the trope of the window to signify an ultimate health or a healing: "And thinking about the nature of our relation to what one sees out of the window, for example, without any effort to see the bottom of things, may some day disclose a force capable of destroying nihilism" (L 602). Yet when Professor Eucalyptus sits in his room, looking out the window, in an attempt to "[seek]/God in the object itself" (CP 475), he does so "without much choice."

Finding relief (just as a "dry eucalyptus seeks god in the rainy cloud") in a "ramshackle" world--one likely to fly to pieces unannounced--is not easy. The nonrestrictive afterthought indicates that he can seek God as long as he desires but to no avail--there are no gods. It is not a matter of whether or not he wishes to see God--the gods have simply disappeared. Desire for God in the object will not transform the object itself into a transparent window through which he will see this essence. The choice is not his to see the Logos; he has only a choice of words, "a choice of the commodious adjective."

Language or the fat and spacious "commodious adjective" is wildly attractive, however, as canto XIV makes clear. Its attractiveness (a new kind of divinity) lies in its playfulness. The play of language is a continual surface description without depth because there is no "beyond the object." One has only a choice of the "adjective," that part of speech used to modify or highlight something other; but here the choice only of adjectives foregrounds that which is traditionally marginalized. Because the poet cannot visually penetrate and make present that "something other," he is left with the modifier itself--pointing nowhere and modifying nothing. Functioning as a synecdoche for language itself, the adjective is robbed of its clarifying function. This muddling is exhibited in the grammatically erroneous use of an adjective ("commodious") modifying an "adjective." The ease of the adjective or language itself comes, however, from this foregrounding of the marginal: the adjective (language) can wander anywhere at random. For Professor Eucalyptus, this wandering in error constitutes a new "paradisal parlance," the newness or difference of which is, "in any case[,] never grim."

What we must remember is that while he may wish for god, the thing-in-itself and "not a substitute," the Professor can admit that "essence" is "not yet well perceived" and perhaps can never be so. His lecture presents a cold vision of the modern parlance of language's errancy. To accept the lecture in its full impact is to realize that there is no presiding consciousness, despite the lyric voice's desire to hang onto this "Inescapable romance, inescapable choice/Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion" (CP 468). The Professor is not, as Bloom states, "the Canon Aspirin of New Haven" (PC 321) because the Canon attempts to assert his monolithic consciousness over the unhealing scission between language and objects, which is exactly what the Professor recognizes to be foolish. Things are not included in each other, and the whole does not constitute the "amassing harmony" that the Canon so desperately needed (CP 403). Reality--language--is a string of substitutions: "A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,/A glassy ocean lying at the door,/A great town hanging pendent in a shade,/An enormous nation happy in a style" (CP 468). Any understanding of the relationship between these phrases hanging in apposition is denied, for it is uncertain how a "mirror," a "lake," an "ocean," a "town," and a "nation" can be considered valid substitutions for one another. "That which is" cannot be seen, not even by the mind, which continually deflects it through its inescapable interpretive processes until it becomes "that which is apprehended" (CP 468). Even what is apprehended cannot be stilled or known: once "The self, the chrysalis of all men/Became divided in the leisure of blue day," it unleashed "a rupture between the originary meaning of being and the word, between meaning and the voice..." (Derrida, OG 22). The sanctioned self of the logocentric era has been fractured "in branchings after day" (CP 468).

And so the lyric poet comes to realize most fully that the "will of necessity, the will of wills" that "he cannot evade" (CP 480) is the will of the fat girl. To continue in the terms of canto XXI, her realm is "the opposite of Cythére." She is not Aphrodite, the goddess of Love and Beauty, because she is a poverty or "an isolation/At the centre." Yet still she lures on the wandering lyric poet, making of him "a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind" (CP 481). She buffets him about in her "disembodiments/[which] still keep occurring" (CP 482), for he can never arrive at this non-locus that swells and shrinks simultaneously. In canto XXVI, her swelling/shrinking occurs over the blank expanse of an ellipsis:

> Seen as inamorata, of loving fame
> Added and added out of a fame-full heart...
>
> But, here, the inamorata, without distance
> And thereby lost, and naked or in rags,
> Shrunk in the poverty of being close (CP 484)

It is only in the fiction of a by-gone scholar's notes that the male can lord over this feminine play of difference.

In canto XXVII, the lyric poet languishes over one of the scholar's notes as left behind in his Segmenta. The scholar's fable portrays the "Ruler of Reality" and his lover "Queen of Fact" (CP 485). While she may be the theorist of death, as the note implies, he is "the theorist of life." Attired in the vestments of nobility, this figure represents "The total excellence of its total book." That he lies at ease with the Queen beside the sea indicates his power, which will not be snuffed out by her otherness or her deathly implications. He is Whitmanesque, as Bloom rightly argues (330), in his lyric power to subdue all to his monolithic self. Consequently, he is encapsuled within a logocentric language of seeing: "'He has thought it out, he thinks it out,/As he has been and is." But this figure is always already within

quotation marks: he is not a master concept or a philosophic given, but merely "draftings of him." Even the "total book" that he signifies is denied absolute origin since all the lyric poet has is but a fragment (a note) of a fragment (the Segmenta).[28] The fiction o. the Ruler's authority is undone in the canto even though the lyric poet attempts to read this writing as a string of facts that will add up to a presence: the scholar "left a note,/As follows," "In addition, there were draftings of him, thus," "Again," "Again," and "Again." Yet if this supplementary data adds up to "[make] an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence" (Derrida, OG 145). He has a note, but it is a note that fails to lead him anywhere (particularly given the splintered bibliographical "origin" of the note itself).

Unlike the scholars of the past, this lyric poet is left with the poverty of "the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,/The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her/Misericordia" (CP 485). The fat girl's "Misericordia," her "compassion and pity,"[29] will release the poet from his fasting and the poverty of his lyric isolation. At her very center, her heart, there is a cold emptiness and an over-full play of signification; and, with each attempt to penetrate this "center," he is spiralled into "This endlessly elaborating poem" (CP 486). This fat paramour is not, as Mary Arensburg claims, "sick at heart in her impoverished state, deprived of food or drink" (38). She does not "[feed] on nothingness outside the text" (38); she is not gaunt and emaciated. As language itself, she is a surfeit of fat folds "in the intricate evasions of as." She does not feed on nothingness, because she is this nothingness itself from which all things are "created." The long elaborating poem is "created from nothingness": it is the tracing of her fat, intricate folds. She is that which disturbs the poet's idealizing premise that reality exists in the mind from the

very start, because she is an exteriority that cannot be appropriated into the self on the basis of some onto-theologic concept of the "two in one" (CP 485). Dispersing the premise that can lead to resolution, she is not, we realize, the nothingness "outside the text": she is textuality, itself.

What she does to the lyric poet is enacted in the fable of the lemon trees in canto XXIX. Here she is disseminated into the "big women" whose "images/Wreathed round and round and round wreath of autumn" (CP 486) in a manner that spellbinds the "wandering mariners," those men in search of some end. In the realm of the women, however, the men's quest is continually deferred. Closure or resolution is postponed because everytime the men think they have arrived, they realize that they have not yet left: "'We are back once more in the land of the elm trees.'" "'But,'" they realize, "'folded over, turned around'." Difference--the play of language or "an alteration/Of words" --intercedes. The men's monologic intention, evident in their "dark-colored words," is deflected and their language wanders arbitrarily: "Their dark-colored words had redescribed the citrons." Language, itself, dangles and spangles playfully in this land of fat women, changing even the countrymen (whom we generally consider to be intrinsic with their place) and dismantling "each constant thing" or philosophic given. In difference (language or women), the lyric poet is continually thrown off his bearings, no matter how severe or how harassing a master he is.

The final image of the woman comes in canto XXXI, wherein the fat girl is depicted simply as "A woman writing a note and tearing it up" (CP 488). The woman is not exactly as Thomas Fink describes her, when he states that she seeks "finality of thought" only to find such resolution "unsatisfying," which leads her to

tear it up and begin again (93). More precisely, she is undecidability itself--she is a continual writing that is a continual dispersal and turning. The lyric poet may yearn for "the edgings and inchings of final form," "the formulae /of statement" or Meaning itself, but language deflects that yearning into "Flickerings from finikin to fine finikin" in infinite regress. The long poem is his attempt to trace her traversing, her crossing over and across and through, without ever really knowing what it is that lures him on: "It may be a shade that traverses/A dust, a force that traverses a shade" (CP 489).

But the lyric poet just keeps pushing onward because even the repetition of the fat girl's incessant movements gives him some sense of control, which lets him believe that she has not completely emasculated him. Survival in this deathly disseminative context hinges on asserting his lyric voice as a stable philosophic construct (hence, the logocentric reverberations):

> "I am the truth, since I am part of what is real, but neither more nor less than those around me. And I am imagination, in a leaden time and in a world that doesnot move for the weight of its own heaviness." (NA 63)

It is his function, as poet, to face reality and to pin it down by naming it: "The fact remains that in facing reality one of the most intense necessities is the need of facing it literally and writing about it literally" (L 710). As he saw it, the long poem was the perfect form in which to face ordinary reality, but it is also the "form" that most perfectly undoes the very notion of "literalism" itself, much less the notion of "reality," "truth," and so forth.

The lyric will to impose resolution by tying the line up into a nice neat circle is, in the longer poem, curiously subverted by its cohabitation with the narrative form. That the two subvert one another is "curious" because, like the

lyric, the narrative is traditionally understood as being structured onto a causal chain that leads to resolution: one event leads inevitably into the next until, upon conclusion, all the manifold elements of the story are resolved into a unified whole that lays bare the significance and meaning of each minute particular. Yet when the lyric and narrative forms meet in the long poetic form, they become implicated in one another--one infects the another. The two do not merge into oneness, and neither do they become raised to the "higher" poetic form of the long poem. Because the fat girl or writing "governs" the long poem, the logocentric impulses of the lyric and narrative are scrambled and even self-cancelling.

In his old age, Stevens did not write long poems because he did not know how to write short ones (L 755), he wrote them as a means of escaping the constricting confines of expected unification in both the lyric and narrative genres. The long poem lets him turn this way and that in his hot pursuit of the ever-elusive fat girl. In this "senseless element" (CP 396) of continual signification and metaphorical aberrance, reason and resolution are repeatedly deferred. It enables Stevens to weave continuously the glistening fictive covering that is wrapped around Ozymandias' bride, even though it is a covering that "covers" an underlying nothingness, "the dominant blank" (CP 477). By the same token, this (non)genre allows Stevens to engage in a play that is repressed by the logocentric tradition, and this is the play of "Words, lines, not meanings, not communications" (CP 465).

For the mature Stevens, the long poem is not the marriage of male and female, lyric and narrative, for here no marriage and no "final relation" (CP 465) can take place. It is merely the playful tracing of the stuttering play of signifiers ("an and yet, and yet, and yet--" [CP 465]) that can only repeatedly defer "the

burning/And breeding and bearing birth of harmony" (CP 465). Desire is whetted and left suspended, waiting and waiting: "as if the disparate halves/Of things were waiting in a betrothal known/To none, awaiting espousal to the sound/Of right joining" (CP 464-465). The delightful fat girl is the abstract ideal of the first idea, the desire for change, and the pleasure of continually flickering tropes; in short, she is the long poem, and the long poem is writing.

ENDNOTES

[1]Also see Patke's The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens: with respect to "The Auroras of Autumn," he claims that while the poet is old, his imagination is not entirely dead (198).

[2]See Peter Brazeau's Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered for repeated references to Stevens' problem with his weight, which at times, soared as high as three hundred pounds (14).

[3]In particular see Bates' article "Major Man and Overman: Wallace Stevens' Use of Nietzsche," Southern Review 15 (1979) 811-839. A condensed version of his argument appears in his later book Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, Ltd., 1985, 247-265.

[4]For the trope of "force" in Stevens see NA 35-36, where he uses the analogy of the wave as a force to describe the inner violence of the poet which is composed in endlessly different manifestations.

[5]OP, 242: "There is about every poet a vast world of other people from which he derives himself and through himself his poetry...His poetry is theirs and theirs is his, because of the interaction between the poet and his time."

[6]As an aside, in Joseph Carroll's Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction, he uses the "fold" metaphorically in his last chapter when he discusses Stevens' reported death-bed conversion to Catholicism (339-343). Stevens may have finally "submitted" to the consolations of a traditional belief, but his long poems are acts of resistance.

[7]The hymen is one of Derrida's "undecidables" that "can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics." The hymen is "neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor unveiling, neither the inside nor the outside, etc." (Positions 43)

[8]See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman" (170).

[9]In a letter to Peter H. Lee, Stevens nicely sums up the function of the poet as a giver: "Isn't it the function of every poet, instead of repeating what has been said before, however skillfully he may be able to do that, to take his station in the midst of the circumstances in which people actually live and to endeavor to give them, as well as himself, the poetry that they need in those very circumstances?" (L 711).

[10]In "Edmund Jabès and the Question of the Book," Derrida aligns writing as

outcast with the sand of the desert: "The difference between speech and writing is sin, the anger of God emerging from itself, lost immediacy, work outside the garden. 'The garden is speech, the desert writing...'" Later he writes that "Nothing flourishes in sand or between cobblestones, if not words" (Writing and Difference 68,69).

[11]Bloom more harshly interprets "turns blankly" as "to trope vainly or write poetry without purpose, in a state of 'This is,' where the wind and the auroras dominate and the wind and auroras themselves are allied as 'gusts of great enkindlings'" (PC 264).

[12]Woman never fully reveals herself. Here she presents herself as the foreigner she is: the Spanish hidalgo, Stevens' man with the blue guitar.

[13]In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens discusses the poet's "obsession" as the desire for freedom. To achieve this goal, poets "purge themselves before reality, in the meantime, in what they intend to be saintly exercises" (OP 227). In a letter to Theodore Weiss, Stevens speaks of young poets as "hermits" (L 587) because their sole object in life is to think exclusively about poetry.

[14]Stevens' fascination with missals is evident in his letter of December 19, 1946, to José Rodriguez Feo, wherein he describes his visit to an exhibit of missals at the Morgan Library (L 543).

[15]The male poet is not terrified by the presence of an external intelligence as Leggett argues in his Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory (184), but by an explosive irrationality or, as Derrida writes, "generative multiplicity" without origin or end or meaning.

[16]Thomas Carlyle's Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship, London and New York: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd. 1908, rpt. 1973, 58. I mention Carlyle's work particularly because it severely challenges the notion of the autobiography: "in the inside of which sealed Bags lie miscellaneous masses of Sheets, and oftener Shreds and Snips, written in Professor Teufelsdröckh's scarce legible cursiv-schrift; and treating of all imaginable things under the Zodiac and above it, but of his own personal history only at rare intervals, and then in the most enigmatic manner (58). The long poem, in my reading, also seriously challenges the notion of poetic autobiography.

[17]See L 493, wherein Stevens states that he refuses to read other artists' work because of his "need to avoid self-consciousness."

[18]See Gregory L. Ulmer's Applied Grammatology for a thorough analysis of Derrida's inversion of traditional "idealization" and "appropriation" to "articulation" and "decomposition" as expressed in his essay "White Mythology" (34ff).

[19]See Gregory Ulmer's Applied Grammatology for a detailed explanation of Derrida's interest in smell and taste, which have been rejected as models for

thinking and writing by Western metaphysics because they are non-objective and non-idealizing (34ff).

[20]Bloom accurately traces the severely negative connotations of the word "festival" in Stevens' poetry, but for reasons different than my own. The polyphonic dimension of the festival, a term which now reverberates with Bakhtin's theories, is a constant threat to the lyric poet: it represents many-voicedness, woman, the suppressed, and narrative (PC 246-247).

[21]My position counters Bloom's overblown argument that while "closure is always an illusion...the Auroras sustains the illusion better than any other poem written, in English, in our century" (PC 254).

[22]Spivak defines Derrida's "dissemination" in the following terms: "Exploiting a false etymological kinship between semantics and semen, Derrida offers this version of textuality: A sowing that does not produce plants, but is simply infinitely repeated. A semination that is not insemination but dissemination, seed spilled in vain, an emission that cannot return to its origin in the father. Not an exact and controlled polysemy, but a proliferation of always different, always postponed meanings" (Of Grammatology lxv).

[23]This reading of the long poem counters Stevens' explanation in "The Irrational Element in Poetry," which states that one manifestation of the poetic dip into the irrational (poetry) is "the disclosure of the individuality of the poet" (OP 219).

[24]My reading is much more radical than Bloom's vague claim that the mystic marriage "remained more of a limitation than a restitution of meaning" (PC 206).

[25]The lyrical voice elevates the Canon from secular figure to transcendental signified, from the image of man as angel to the trope of man as Angel. The Angel does not just "materialize" from nowhere to solve his aesthetic problems, as Vendler argues (OEW 198).

[26]When dealing with this question in his article contained in Doggett and Buttel's Wallace Stevens: A Celebration, Riddel makes the error of arguing that "Notes" is the "play between a lover's desire for 'accessible bliss'...and the repeated questioning of the 'hour/Filled with expressible bliss..., an hour for which the poet has 'No need'..." (326). Semantically and syntactically, however, Riddel is incorrect. The poem reads "in which I have/No need, am happy..." (CP 404-405), and this adjectival clause, headed by a preposition, has as its antecedent "an hour/Filled with expressible bliss" (CP 404). Hence, he says the opposite of what Riddel claims he says: he does not say that the hour of bliss is one for which he has no need, but--quite the reverse--he questions if there is such an hour, an hour in which he will have no need, be happy. This lyric singer is far from rejecting absolutely any hour of such bliss.

[27]This argument runs counter to Rajeev Patke's claim that this poem, like "The Auroras," "represents the speaking (or thinking) voice of a single

consciousness" (222).

[28]See Joseph Riddel's "Metaphoric Staging," in Doggett and Buttell's Wallace Stevens: A Celebration, for a more thorough analysis of canto XXVII (315).

[29]See Mary Arensberg's "'Golden Vacancies': Wallace Stevens' Problematics of Place and Presence" (38).

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